

# CARICOM Strong

## Food Security and Decarbonised Shipbuilding

### *Concept Discussion Brief*

Ian Dash, Chairman | Champion Maritime Limited | 13 September 2026

### Guaranteed regional markets for regional producers

We propose CARICOM Strong as a programme to increase regional agricultural and food production, progressively replace extra-regional food supplies and strengthen food security. Guaranteed regional markets would give farmers, food manufacturers and packagers the confidence to expand output. Dependable decarbonised shipping would connect that production to buyers, while supporting CARICOM shipbuilding and the transfer and local implementation of EU sustainable maritime energy products and technology. The programme is designed to serve CARICOM's existing food security mandate, Vision 25 by 2025+5, rather than create a parallel initiative.

Canada's Budget 2025 links its Canada Strong agenda to domestic purchasing, investment in productive capacity and reducing internal trade barriers. CARICOM could adapt that principle by directing more regional food spending towards regional producers and developing the shipping, energy and technical capability to serve them. *Canada Strong policy reference*

We seek discussion with CARICOM governments, the CARICOM Private Sector Organisation (CPSO), producers, buyers, European technology partners and development-finance institutions on purchasing commitments, a phased carriage standard and investment. CARICOM Strong is a proposed initiative; government adoption, buyer commitments and funding remain to be secured.

### Anchored in Vision 25 by 2025+5

CARICOM Heads of Government committed to reducing the Region's food import bill, now exceeding US\$6 billion, by 25 per cent. At the Forty-Eighth Regular Meeting of the Conference in February 2025, they extended the initiative to 2030 as Vision 25 by 2025+5, with a collective target of 4.3 million tonnes of regional food production by 2030. *CARICOM extension announcement*

The Vision is implemented through the CARICOM Agri-Food Systems Strategy, which gives special attention to highly imported priority products including poultry, corn, soya, meat, rice and niche vegetables. Implementation is guided by the Special Ministerial Taskforce on Food Production and Food Security, supported by the Council for Trade and Economic Development (COTED). *Vision 25 by 2025 initiative and Agri-Food Systems Strategy*

CARICOM Strong is proposed as the market-guarantee and logistics layer of that mandate. It would convert the Vision's production targets into contracted regional demand and connect producers to buyers through dependable decarbonised carriage. The product schedule should be drawn from the Vision's priority list, adoption should proceed through the Taskforce and COTED machinery already guiding the Vision, and programme metrics should report directly against Vision 25 by 2025+5 targets.

The CARICOM Private Sector Organisation (CPSO), an Associate Institution of CARICOM, leads the private-sector side of the Vision and is the natural counterpart for organising buyer commitments. CPSO has prepared investment business cases targeting the displacement of some US\$418.8 million of extra-regional agri-food imports, reports to Heads of Government on regional air and maritime transportation, and is building supplier-development and market-integration capability, including a regional AgriMSE database, under a CDB-funded project with IICA. CARICOM Strong should be developed with CPSO so that purchasing commitments, supplier aggregation and the carriage standard draw on that existing work rather than duplicate it. *CPSO 25 by 2025 workstream*

## Proposed carriage standard

All regionally produced agricultural and food products moving between CARICOM ports would progressively be carried on decarbonised ships built within CARICOM, majority beneficially owned and effectively controlled by CARICOM citizens and qualifying residents, and operated by them.

The scope includes fresh produce and qualifying value-added or packaged food products. Farmers, food manufacturers and packagers are the intended beneficiaries. The final product schedule and origin rules should define eligibility and regional processing requirements. The geographical scope includes mainland CARICOM producers and ports, including Guyana, Suriname and Belize.

## How guaranteed markets would work

Purchasing and supply agreements would provide the market guarantee. Scheduled carriage and an effective cold chain would enable producers to fulfil those agreements. Contracts would identify committed quantities, quality standards, delivery windows, price terms and payment obligations.

- Participating retailers, wholesalers, processors, hospitality businesses and public purchasers would commit demand for eligible regional products.
- Producer groups and food businesses would plan planting, processing and packaging against that demand, with aggregation where individual suppliers cannot fill a shipment.
- Scheduled carriers would provide bookable capacity, suitable temperature control and delivery commitments coordinated with buyers and suppliers.

Contracted demand would support investment and working capital for increased regional production. Market guarantees would cover agreed quantities, specifications and prices. Coordinated customs and food-safety procedures should make qualifying regional food easier to trade while maintaining necessary standards.

## The EU and IMO negotiating opportunity

Proposed EU Article 3gab would reserve 900,000 EU Emissions Trading System (ETS) allowances annually until 2035 for maritime decarbonisation in UN-recognised Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) whose GDP per capita is below the EU average. At an illustrative €75 per allowance, this represents €67.5 million annually across eligible countries worldwide. Allocation rules remain to be established. The draft sets no vessel-tonnage minimum or EU-port-call condition for this reserve; it creates no automatic project entitlement or payment per tonne of avoided emissions. *EU proposal Article 3gab*

The proposed Sustainable Maritime Alternative Propulsion mechanism, SMAP, would support sustainable fuels and zero-emission propulsion, including electric and wind-assisted systems. It includes support for vessels from 400 GT to below 5,000 GT on qualifying EU-linked voyages, subject to technology-origin and other conditions. It is a distinct mechanism from Article 3gab. Regional construction does not itself settle eligibility for technology support. *Commission presentation on SMAP*

The proposed ETS extension to specified smaller-vessel categories, envisaged from 2031, would retain geographical limits. Alpha Zulu's estimated 480 GT places it within the proposed size band, but tonnage alone establishes neither EU ETS coverage nor funding eligibility. Article 3gab is the more directly relevant route to explore for Caribbean-only services. *EU proposal on scope and support*

The IMO Net-Zero Framework would combine fuel-lifecycle emissions requirements with compliance pricing for covered international ships above the 5,000 GT threshold. Ships below 5,000 GT are outside its initial scope. Its proposed fund would support cleaner shipping and help address negative effects on vulnerable states, including SIDS and LDCs. Direct rewards or tradable credits for RUTH and Alpha Zulu should therefore not be assumed. *IMO framework explanation*

IMO's published timetable provides for its Marine Environment Protection Committee meeting from 30 November to 3 December 2026 and a resumed adoption session on 4 December, subject to confirmation. Adoption remains uncertain and would be followed by acceptance and entry-into-force procedures. The implementation timetable must be confirmed. *IMO meeting timetable*

## **The CARICOM Strong investment proposition**

CARICOM Strong would offer a measurable programme to expand regional food production and replace extra-regional supply through decarbonised agricultural carriage. The investment request would cover regional shipyards, vessels, renewable power, cold storage and workforce development. Growing regional production and committed cargo demand would support repeat deployments of EU maritime energy technology within CARICOM, with local integration, maintenance and skills development.

The central purpose of adopting the carriage standard and purchasing commitments early is to trigger across-the-board investment now, ahead of full implementation. A legislated phase-in with published dates converts future reserved demand into bankable present demand: shipyards, vessel owners, farmers, processors, cold-chain operators and training institutions can commit capital today against a market trajectory they can see. The durability of comparable carriage regimes is precisely what has sustained long-term private investment in domestic shipbuilding and fleets elsewhere; the phased CARICOM standard would perform the same signalling function for regional food production and maritime capability.

### **Decarbonised shipbuilding and participation**

The shipbuilding element of this programme is where a participation commitment bites hardest and where it is most readily achieved. The occupations decarbonised shipbuilding creates — advanced-composite design and fabrication, marine electrification and energy storage, digital operations and remote monitoring — are new to the Caribbean, and therefore carry no incumbent workforce and no inherited pattern of exclusion. Roles that do not yet exist can be designed inclusive from the outset, in recruitment, training places and advancement pathways, rather than reformed against established custom decades later. The character of the work reinforces this: composite fabrication, and electrical, electronic and systems work, depend far less upon sustained heavy manual handling than steel construction and engine-room practice, removing a barrier that has historically excluded women in fact and still more in perception.

Because the yards, the training places and the supervisory cadre would be established rather than reformed, recruitment and progression can be built inclusive from the first intake. The Alpha Zulu programme sets a floor rather than a target: not fewer than 40 per cent of positions across shipbuilding, design, vessel operations and crewing are held by Caribbean women, certified under the MARIFEM scheme established by Part X of the Barbados Merchant Shipping Act, 2024-28 and independently audited — a Barbadian-origin statutory scheme whose scope extends to shipbuilding, ship repair and ship recycling facilities and to training institutions, and which certifies against measured representation, pay equity and training and career opportunity. Member States configuring existing maritime industrial assets to serve the regional fleet should be invited to adopt a comparable standard, so that the industrial capability the region builds is one in which women participate from its commencement rather than being admitted to it later. A verified participation standard is also increasingly a condition of European and development-finance support, and is ordinarily asserted rather than certified; a regional programme able to demonstrate it holds an advantage in negotiation.

These funding proposals can be read as incentives for international agreement, particularly Article 3gab's targeted SIDS and LDC support. That is a political interpretation. The reviewed EU text does not make funding conditional on an individual country's IMO vote. UCL's September negotiations report identifies finance for a fair transition as central to securing agreement. *UCL September negotiations assessment*

The negotiating request should specify funding, timing, small-vessel eligibility and a technology-transfer package covering integration, training, maintenance and appropriate licensing. This would offer European suppliers a defined deployment opportunity while developing Caribbean industrial capability. A favourable IMO vote would not itself secure an EU grant.

***A fossil-fuel-free RoPAC is not a cheaper way to move imports — it is a floating extension of the regional food system, a moving cold store and market bridge: strategic infrastructure that makes imports unnecessary.***

## Freight costs and food affordability

Large international ships supplying Caribbean markets could pass some cleaner-fuel, equipment and compliance costs through to importers. Regional producers may also face higher costs for imported inputs and packaging. The degree of pass-through would depend on competition, contracts, ship efficiency and cargo utilisation. No single Caribbean-wide food-price increase can be established from the proposals alone.

A useful first approximation is that the percentage increase in delivered cost equals freight's share of that cost multiplied by the percentage increase in freight, assuming full pass-through and no other changes.

### Illustrative sensitivity

Using the discussion's planning assumptions of US\$3,000 per TEU and 20 standard pallets per TEU, plus an illustrative US\$20,000 cargo value before freight, the starting goods-plus-freight cost is US\$23,000. The pallet conversion is a commercial modelling convention, not a statement of physical container capacity.

| Assumed freight increase | Extra cost per TEU | Extra cost per pallet | Increase in goods plus freight cost |
|--------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 10%                      | US\$300            | US\$15                | 1.3%                                |
| 20%                      | US\$600            | US\$30                | 2.6%                                |
| 30%                      | US\$900            | US\$45                | 3.9%                                |

These are sensitivity calculations, not predictions of regulatory charges or retail food inflation. They exclude insurance, duties, taxes and distribution costs. Lower-value cargoes face a larger percentage effect from the same freight surcharge; refrigeration and transshipment can add exposure.

For longer-term context, UCL and RMI modelling published in August 2026 reported global maritime transport-cost increases of roughly 70–80% by 2050 across four candidate IMO policy designs. These are modelled transport costs over decades, not equivalent forecasts for Caribbean supermarket prices. *UCL analysis of candidate IMO policies*

## Protecting the intended food security benefit

The programme should track additional regional production, substitution of extra-regional food supplies, delivered prices and emissions. A carriage requirement introduced before adequate service exists could increase costs or interrupt supply. Implementation should follow demonstrated capacity, suitable cold-chain performance and affordable service, with transparent temporary exemptions where necessary.

Participation should remain open to all qualifying regional carriers and producers. Published service terms, competitive access and scrutiny of surcharges would help ensure that public support benefits producers and consumers. Renewable energy and regional ownership can improve resilience, but lower freight prices must be demonstrated through operating results.

Schooner RUTH's planned transition and the Alpha Zulu fleet concept provide an initial demonstration pathway. Monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV) should be built in from day one. Trials should establish cargo volumes, schedule reliability, temperature performance, operating costs and emissions before commitments are expanded.

## The autonomous Alpha Zulu RoPAC promise

The Alpha Zulu fleet concept is a fossil-fuel-free roll-on passenger and cargo (RoPAC) vessel designed for progressive autonomy on intraregional routes. Its promise to the guaranteed-market programme is dependable, scheduled connectivity: frequent sailings on thin inter-island routes, temperature-controlled cargo space and passenger carriage that improves route economics. Archipelagic short-sea conditions — short repetitive routes, confined regional waters and coherent regulatory geography — make the Caribbean a plausible early jurisdiction for maritime autonomous surface ship (MASS) operations.

The Alpha Zulu platform is prepared for staged implementation of IMO MASS autonomous shipping. The centreline section carries twin sensor masts supporting duplicated communications and navigation systems, including radar, FLIR and Starlink; independent twin electric propulsion systems; and provision for hydrogen fuel cells, ready for adoption when the complete green hydrogen supply chain — from production through regional bunkering to onboard power generation — becomes cost-effective. The initial configuration comprises 30 × 18.5 kg H<sub>2</sub> tanks (≈555 kg H<sub>2</sub> at 700 bar; ≈8.5 t installed), arranged 8 + 8 + 8 + 6 across the bilge bays below the cargo deck, with stowage designed for IGF Code compliance. Target quiet electric endurance is 200 hours / 2,000 nm. The bays accommodate up to 60 tanks without redesign.

The pathway follows the IMO's four Degrees of autonomy at a deliberate pace: Degree 1, full crew with automated decision support, from corridor go-live in 2027; Degree 2, remotely supported operation with seafarers aboard, from the mid-2030s as the Caribbean Shore Control Centre commissions; Degree 3 selectively from the late 2030s on fixed routes in favourable conditions; Degree 4 held as a long-horizon option, not committed. This is an evolution of seafaring roles, not a labour-saving programme: total maritime employment grows across the pathway as skilled shore-based supervisory, engineering and cybersecurity roles are added alongside vessel crews.

That growth is also the programme's principal instrument of widening participation. Shore-based supervision is a maritime career that does not require extended absence from home — the six- to nine-month deep-sea contract that has done more than any formal barrier to keep Caribbean women out of seafaring careers — and a wind-primary vessel with regenerative electric propulsion has no engine room in the conventional sense, no bunkering and no fuel handling, so shipboard roles are correspondingly oriented to systems management. An island-scale packet service running weekly loops in home waters with regular home-port turnarounds extends that accessibility further. The participation floor applies to Shore Control Centre and seagoing roles as it does to shipbuilding, and is certified under the same scheme. Dedicated seagoing training berths, carried on every vessel of the class and binding on any subsequent owner, are what make the floor attainable rather than declaratory.

The regulatory pathway is developing. IMO adopted the non-mandatory International Code of Safety for Maritime Autonomous Surface Ships (MASS Code) in May 2026, in effect from 1 July 2026 for an experience-building phase; a mandatory Code is targeted for adoption by 1 July 2030 with entry into force planned for 1 January 2032. The current Code applies to cargo ships covered by SOLAS Chapter I, generally ships over 500 GT on international voyages; at an estimated 480 GT, Alpha Zulu sits below that threshold, so autonomous or remotely supported operation on intraregional routes would rest on flag-state and port-state approvals, informed by the Code; passenger carriage adds further certification requirements. A proposed Barbados MASS regulatory sandbox under existing Barbadian merchant shipping and emissions-control statute, aligned with the IMO experience-building phase, would provide the sovereign legal instrument for corridor trials — with operational data contributing to the international evidence base for the mandatory Code. The full sequencing, challenges and safeguards are set out in the accompanying annex, Progressive Autonomy — Alpha Zulu and the IMO MASS Pathway. *IMO MASS Code adoption*

## Regional implementation and decisions required

Articles 137 and 140 of the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas provide a relevant basis for common transport standards, small-vessel enterprises, shipping incentives, agricultural refrigeration facilities and technology transfer. A regional carriage

reservation would still require an agreed legal instrument and implementation by participating states. *Revised Treaty transport provisions*

The regional-build and ownership conditions require separate consideration under applicable trade commitments. An IDB legal analysis identifies Article 109 of the CARIFORUM–EU EPA provisions on international maritime access, discriminatory restrictions and cargo-sharing arrangements. Their current application and any necessary negotiated accommodation should be established before adoption. Cross-border CARICOM carriage does not automatically become national cabotage.

*IDB legal analysis of transport services*

Carriage reservations are established international practice. The United States Jones Act reserves domestic coastwise transport to vessels built in the United States, owned by US citizens and crewed by US mariners. Canada’s Coasting Trade Act reserves coasting trade to Canadian-registered, duty-paid ships and licenses foreign vessels only where no suitable Canadian vessel is available, a waiver mechanism comparable to the temporary exemptions proposed here. Nigeria’s Coastal and Inland Shipping (Cabotage) Act 2003 combines build, ownership, crewing and flag requirements with a waiver system. At community level, EU Regulation 3577/92 reserves intra-EU maritime cabotage, including island cabotage, to Community shipowners, the closest structural precedent for a bloc-wide reservation. *Jones Act statutory provision · Canada Coasting Trade Act · EU maritime cabotage regulation*

CARICOM Strong deliberately differs from the century-old US regime. Phased introduction, open regional participation, published cost monitoring and transparent temporary exemptions are designed to secure the industrial and food security benefits of reservation while avoiding the cost rigidities critics attribute to the Jones Act, including within the Caribbean in the case of Puerto Rico.

The standard should define product origin, regional construction, beneficial ownership, control and residence. Regional construction should accommodate eligible EU equipment and technology integrated locally. ZeroFF criteria should require no onboard fossil-fuel burning and verify emissions across the energy supply chain. Vessel-manufacturing emissions would require separate assessment.

### Indicative phase in for discussion

The earlier programme envisaged a pilot corridor from March 2027 and the following milestones. These remain proposed targets, subject to purchasing commitments, finance and sufficient compliant capacity. The measurement basis for each share, such as cargo tonnes, must be agreed. The proposed 25 per cent carriage share in 2030 aligns with the Vision 25 by 2025+5 target year, so carriage capacity would scale alongside the production the Vision seeks to deliver. Announcing the trajectory early is itself the investment signal: each milestone gives producers, buyers and carriers a dated basis for capacity commitments.

| Year | Proposed share of eligible agricultural carriage |
|------|--------------------------------------------------|
| 2030 | 25%                                              |
| 2032 | 50%                                              |
| 2034 | 75%                                              |
| 2035 | 100%                                             |

### Decisions sought

- Identify food products for replacing extra-regional supply, starting from the Vision 25 by 2025+5 priority list, assess regional production capacity and establish buyer–producer agreements, coordinated with CPSO, with committed demand, delivery specifications and payment terms.

- Develop a common carriage instrument, simplify regional food-trade procedures and resolve trade-law compatibility, regional eligibility and temporary exemption arrangements.
- Prepare a costed regional shipbuilding and EU technology-transfer programme covering wind and electric propulsion, energy storage, renewable generation, shore power and cold-chain systems, with local installation, commissioning, training and maintenance capability.
- Agree that regional shipbuilding, training and operations capacity established under this programme adopt a floor of not fewer than 40 per cent participation by women, independently certified rather than self-declared, and that Member States configuring existing maritime industrial assets apply a comparable standard.
- Seek explicit EU and IMO funding commitments, including access for small vessels, while testing RUTH and Alpha Zulu as initial delivery platforms.
- Measure additional regional food output, the regional share of food consumption, extra-regional imports displaced, affordability, producer sales, service reliability, regional employment, participation by women across shipbuilding and crewing, and verified emissions.

CARICOM Strong would turn regional food demand into increased regional production, reduced dependence on extra-regional supply and stronger food security. Guaranteed producer markets and a regionally built, owned and operated decarbonised fleet would support that outcome and help deliver Vision 25 by 2025+5.

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*Note: the MARIFEM certification scheme is established under Part X of the Barbados Merchant Shipping Act, 2024-28. Certification is issued by the Administration following verification; references in this brief are to the programme's intention to enter the scheme. Participation figures are project-promoter commitments.*