

The significance of ISO 14001 and why ISO 14001:2026?

EXPLORING THE LEADING EMS STANDARD, ITS BENEFITS, EVOLUTION
AND HOW WE CAN SUPPORT YOUR TRANSITION

White paper

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From defining “EMS” to the 2026 edition

What is an environmental management system (EMS)?

An EMS can be developed and implemented in compliance with ISO 14001, as part of your organization's strategy to implement your environmental policy and address governmental regulations.

An EMS focuses on meeting the commitments in your policy, which may include reducing or eliminating the negative environmental impacts of your products, services and activities, and/or increasing their positive effects.

What is ISO 14001?

ISO 14001 is the internationally recognized EMS standard. It provides a framework for organizations to design and implement an EMS, and continually improve their environmental performance.

By adhering to the standard, your organization can ensure that it is taking proactive measures to minimize its environmental footprint, comply with relevant laws and achieve environmental objectives.

The framework encompasses various aspects, from resource usage and waste management to monitoring environmental performance and involving stakeholders in environmental commitments.

Why is ISO 14001 important?

In an era of environmental consciousness and global challenges, such as climate change, biodiversity loss and resource depletion, organizations have a vital role to play. ISO 14001 offers a structured approach for addressing these urgent concerns.

Over 500,000 ISO 14001 certifications have been issued in more than 180 countries. By adopting the standard, organizations demonstrate dedication to regulatory compliance and continual environmental improvement.

The benefits of a proactive approach include energy conservation, reduced waste and costs, enhanced reputation and stakeholder trust, and readiness for participation in global trade and supply chains.

ISO 14001 is part of the ISO 14000 family, which provides a framework and tools for organizations to manage their environmental impacts, including EMS and life cycle assessment (LCA). ISO 14001 is the only certifiable standard within the family, although certification is not mandatory.

500K+

Over 500,000 ISO 14001 certificates have been issued.



What are the key principles?

ISO 14001 principles include:

- Leadership and commitment: effective environmental management starts from the top
- Environmental policy: customize your policy to your context and needs
- Planning: identify environmental aspects and set objectives
- Implementation and operation: define the resources and responsibilities
- Evaluation of success: monitor and measure your performance against objectives
- Continuous improvement: ongoing enhancement of your EMS
- Life cycle perspective: consider your environmental impact throughout the product life cycle
- Integration with business processes: align environmental management with your overall business strategy

What topics are covered?

ISO 14001 covers a multitude of topics, including:

- Resource use
- Waste management
- Environmental performance measurement
- Engagement with stakeholders

What are the benefits?

The numerous benefits include:

- Enhanced environmental performance: adoption can lead to reduced waste production, resource consumption and pollutant emissions, ultimately resulting in a minimized environmental footprint
- Regulatory compliance: understand and meet environmental legal requirements to help you avoid potential fines, penalties and legal actions

- Better risk management: identify, assess and manage environmental risks, protecting you from potential liabilities and unexpected disruptions
- Cost savings: efficient resource usage, waste reduction and streamlined processes create significant cost reductions, offsetting the EMS implementation and maintenance costs
- Operational excellence: continuous improvement leads to streamlined operations, waste minimization and enhanced productivity
- Improved stakeholder and customer trust: in a marketplace increasingly valuing sustainability, certification can differentiate your business, bolstering reputation and stakeholder and customer loyalty
- Contributing to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including:



How is ISO 14001 different from other environmental standards?

Although there are multiple environmental standards, ISO 14001 stands out as it provides a holistic framework for an EMS, encompassing all aspects of an organization's environmental impact and offering tools for continuous improvement.

Why is ISO 14001 certification important?

ISO 14001 is one of many ISO standards that enable certification by a third party, such as SGS. However, certification is not mandatory.

Certification demonstrates to clients and customers that your organization has effectively implemented ISO 14001 and a robust, compliant EMS. It serves as a globally recognized stamp of approval.

What is the certification process?

The certification process typically involves a gap analysis, implementing the EMS as per the standard, internal audits, management reviews and a certification audit by an external body.

Many certification bodies, like SGS, are accredited, meaning that an accreditation body has provided independent confirmation of their competence. This may bring an additional layer of confidence for stakeholders.

What are the origins of ISO 14001?

ISO 14001 began primarily as a response to the 1992 Rio Summit on the Environment and the Uruguay General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) negotiations, which emphasized global environmental protection. BSI published its BS 7750 standard in 1992. Before this, environmental management had been part of larger systems, such as Responsible Care.

ISO 14001 was first launched in 1996 and has evolved into the leading environmental management framework, adopted by over 500,000 organizations worldwide. The standard became popular due to its comprehensive approach to compliance and environmental requirements, helping organizations reduce their environmental impacts. Today, it serves as a vital tool for organizations seeking to implement effective EMS.



Enter the age of ISO 14001:2026

Why is another revision needed?

ISO 14001:2026 introduces important changes to the world's leading EMS standard. The updated version reflects growing global priorities, such as climate resilience, biodiversity and sustainable resource use. It also aims to clarify and strengthen existing requirements.

As the revised standard is under development, organizations should begin preparing for the transition. As a key participant in ISO technical committees, we offer expert support and tools to guide you through the change.

What is ISO 14001:2026?

ISO 14001:2026 is the upcoming version, replacing ISO 14001:2015. It maintains the same core structure (Annex SL) but introduces new terminology, refined clauses and a stronger focus on environmental performance.

When will ISO 14001:2026 be published?

The final revised edition is likely to be published in January 2026.

What are the anticipated changes?

The new version includes moderate but impactful changes. While no entirely new requirements are introduced, many clauses are revised for greater clarity, traceability and accountability.

Clause	Likely update	Your action
4 – context of the organization	- Environmental conditions (e.g. climate change, pollution, biodiversity) must now be explicitly considered - EMS scope must reflect a life cycle approach - Key documents must be “available as documented information”	Update context analysis, stakeholder maps and scope definition
5 – leadership and commitment	- Updated terminology: “meet compliance obligations” replaces “fulfill” - Greater emphasis on conserving natural resources and ecosystem protection	Revise your environmental policy and ensure executive engagement
6 – planning	- Clause 6.3 (New): requires a structured approach to EMS-related change management - Emergency situations are now separated from abnormal operations - Planning is split into: 6.1.4: identify risks and opportunities 6.1.5: plan actions accordingly	Refresh risk registers, aspect-impact evaluations and planning documentation
7 – support	- Terminology now standardized: all EMS records must be “available as documented information” - Communication must empower employees to contribute to continual improvement	Review communication and training processes
8 – operations	“Outsourced processes” now referred to as “externally provided processes, products or services” - Operational control must extend to suppliers and partners - Emergency preparedness must align with risk planning (Clause 6.1.2)	Strengthen supplier management and emergency planning
9 – performance evaluation	- Explicit requirement to evaluate environmental performance and EMS effectiveness - Internal audits must define objectives, in addition to scope and criteria - Management reviews are restructured into three sub-clauses: inputs, process and results	Update internal audit and management review processes
10 – improvement	- Clause 10.1 removed – its content is now integrated into 10.2 and 10.3 - More structured approach to nonconformity and corrective action - Clear linkage between Clause 9 findings and continual improvement	Strengthen root cause analysis and improvement tracking



Why is ISO 14001:2026 important?

The revised standard is not just about compliance. It reflects your organization's commitment to:

- Sustainable development
- Climate resilience
- Environmental accountability
- Improved stakeholder confidence

Implementing these changes now can position your business as a leader in sustainability and ESG performance.

What will ISO 14001:2026 mean to ISO 14001:2015-certified companies?

The revised standard presents an excellent opportunity for you to review and update your EMS, ensuring that it effectively addresses any changes and aligns with your needs, as well as those of your customers and other stakeholders.

When published, ample information will be available about the updates and their possible impact on organizations. We will keep you updated.

ISO 14001:2015-certified organizations will have a transition period, usually three years, to migrate their EMS to ISO 14001:2026.

What is the expected transition timeline?

Phase	Milestone
Current standard	ISO 14001:2015
Draft International Standard (DIS)	Published June 2025
Final Draft International Standard (FDIS)	Expected October 2025
New standard published	Expected January 2026
Transition deadline	Expected three-year period (to early 2029)

Start your ISO 14001:2026 transition planning early to avoid disruption and maintain certification.

What is a decent transition checklist?

To ensure you are on track for ISO 14001:2026:

- Conduct a gap analysis against the DIS
- Update all EMS documentation to reflect new clause references and language
- Train staff on new responsibilities and terminology
- Prepare for structured change management (Clause 6.3)
- Reinforce supplier and life cycle controls
- Engage top leadership in the transition process





How can SGS help?

Whether you are maintaining existing certification or implementing a management system for the first time, we can inform you of the latest developments, expected transition timelines and key considerations for transition planning.

We are trusted by organizations worldwide to deliver accredited services that support quality, sustainability and regulatory compliance. Our experts are directly involved in ISO technical committees, ensuring we stay ahead of changes and provide reliable, up-to-date guidance.

We can offer a complete range of services, including readiness assessments, training, gap analysis and certification, once the standard is published. Our global network, technical expertise and active role in standard development make us a trusted partner for your ISO 14001:2026 journey. With the right support, you can navigate change efficiently, maintain compliance and unlock new opportunities for continual improvement and business resilience.

Transition with a trusted partner

As a global certification body with deep EMS expertise and over 30 years of sustainability leadership, we provide comprehensive services, including:

- Gap assessments
- Readiness audits
- Transition training
- Guidance on life cycle, biodiversity and climate-related risks
- Full transition and certification services once the standard is officially released
- Integrated management systems (IMS) support for ISO 9001, ISO 45001 and more

The certification and sustainability partner for your environmental management needs

Contact our experts now to start or enhance your ISO 14001:2026 journey.

For more information:

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