

Media Contact:

Will Wiquist, (202) 418-0509
will.wiquist@fcc.gov

For Immediate Release

FCC UPDATES SATELLITE ORBITAL DEBRIS MITIGATION RULES

WASHINGTON, April 23, 2020—The Federal Communications Commission today comprehensively updated its satellite rules on orbital debris mitigation for the first time in over 15 years. The Commission also voted to seek further public comment on other proposals related to mitigating orbital debris. Orbital debris, also known as space debris, can pose a risk to satellites and inhabitable spacecraft, and in some instances, pieces of debris falling back to earth can pose a risk to persons and property on the surface of the earth.

The Commission's orbital debris rules cover all Commission-licensed satellites and satellites granted access to the U.S. market. Since 2004, when the rules were last updated, there have been significant changes in satellite technologies and market conditions, particularly in the low earth orbit region of space. These changes include the increasing use of lower-cost small satellites, such as CubeSats, as well as plans for the deployment of large constellations of non-geostationary orbit systems, some involving thousands of satellites. The Report and Order adopted today updates the Commission's rules to reflect these changes.

Specifically, the new rules improve the specificity and clarity of rules that require disclosure of debris mitigation plans by satellite companies. The changes include requiring that satellite applicants assign numerical values to collision risk, probability of successful post-mission disposal, and casualty risk associated with those satellites that will re-enter earth's atmosphere. Satellite applicants will also have new disclosure requirements related to protecting inhabitable spacecraft, maneuverability, use of deployment devices, release of persistent liquids, proximity operations, trackability and identification, and information sharing for situational awareness. The new rules also update the process for geostationary orbit satellite license term extension requests.

The Commission today also adopted a Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, which invites additional comment on orbital debris mitigation measures related to the probability of accidental explosions; collision risk and casualty risk for satellite constellations on a system-wide basis; and on requiring maneuverability for space stations located above a certain altitude in the low earth orbit region and limiting post-mission orbital lifetime. The Commission will also seek public comment on adopting an indemnification requirement similar to one used in some other countries and on the use of a surety bond tied to post-mission disposal.

Today's action will help to preserve the space environment for continued investment, deployment, and innovation in space-based services.

Action by the Commission April 23, 2020 by Report and Order and Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (FCC 20-54). Chairman Pai, Commissioners O’Rielly, Carr, and Starks approving. Commissioner Rosenworcel concurring. Chairman Pai, Commissioners O’Rielly, Carr, Rosenworcel, and Starks issuing separate statements.

IB Docket No. 18-313

###

Media Relations: (202) 418-0500 / ASL: (844) 432-2275 / TTY: (888) 835-5322 / Twitter: @FCC / www.fcc.gov

This is an unofficial announcement of Commission action. Release of the full text of a Commission order constitutes official action. See MCI v. FCC, 515 F.2d 385 (D.C. Cir. 1974).