STATEMENT OF COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS

Re*: Mitigation of Orbital Debris in the New Space Age*, IB Docket No. 18-313

While much of the focus has been on the urban areas that have paid the heaviest price during the COVID-19 pandemic, the coronavirus spares no community. In the last few weeks, we've heard about Sioux Falls, South Dakota, which now has by far the largest number of COVID-19 cases per capita of any Midwestern State. Other rural areas like Randolph County, Illinois, Osage County, Oklahoma, and Albany, Georgia, are experiencing surges of infections that could quickly challenge their resources.

Broadband is a key weapon in the fight against COVID-19. With a good broadband connection, people can help limit the spread of the disease while remaining in touch with work, participating in distance learning, and receiving medical treatment via telemedicine. Yet for many of the rural communities that are coping with the first wave of infections, COVID-19 has brought home the consequences of Internet Inequality. In Missouri, Maries County has not even attempted a remote learning program because 30 percent of its students lack broadband access. Following a wave of local hospital closures, small towns throughout the USA are struggling with how they will care with COVID-19 patients with no local doctors and no telemedicine capabilities.

Communities like these may not be focused on orbital debris policy, but today's decision should help them by accelerating the growth of the latest generation of satellite broadband. This technology uses low-earth-orbit satellites to provide internet connectivity with latency and speeds superior to existing satellite broadband options and competitive with cable and fiber offerings. While traditional broadband providers start their networks from urban centers and expand outwards, satellite providers can provide service to everyone once their satellites are operational, regardless of where they live or the population density of their community. Next-gen satellite broadband technology holds tremendous promise for connecting people in the hardest-to-reach communities in rural America, and I'm excited that American companies like SpaceX and Amazon are leading this burgeoning industry.

I appreciate that the Chairman responded to the concerns raised by me and Commissioner Carr with the original draft of this decision. I strongly believe that we should pay close attention to NASA's expertise when it comes to setting specific standards in space policy.

In particular, I'm glad that we revised language regarding two aspects of the draft rules that would have significantly inhibited the growth of next-generation satellite broadband. The draft order originally adopted a standard for collision risk that departed from NASA's recommendation to assess that risk on a per-satellite basis. Similarly, the draft adopted a casualty risk standard that differed from NASA's recommendation both with respect to the chance of injury and by applying it on a per-constellation basis. While we should do our utmost to reduce the risk of collisions or injury, I also agree with NASA's expert judgment that the approach we adopt today preserves safety while we and our sister agencies study whether a different standard makes sense for these constellations.

Space may seem like a long way away from the fight against COVID-19, but the rules we adopt here could have a profound impact on how rural America responds to future crises. I'm

pleased we were able to spur American leadership in this promising industry while still promoting space safety. I look forward to seeing the results.

Thank you to the staff of the International Bureau for their hard work on this proceeding.