

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS**

Re: *Space Innovation*, IB Docket No. 22-271; *Mitigation of Orbital Debris in the New Space Age*, IB Docket No. 18-313

Here at the Commission, we've been hard at work promoting and adapting to a new space economy. To measure success, we've often marveled at new system deployments and celebrated the new capabilities they've brought to market. But as a space regulator, our role is about more than just making sure the next new mission achieves liftoff. We also need to plan ahead for the missions we know will follow—and that means making sure that a new era of space innovation ultimately doesn't collapse by the weight of its own success.

That's the motivation behind the order we adopt today. We know that orbital debris is already an issue. We also know that the amount of debris is largely a function of what we put up, net of what we bring down, plus the massive quantity of debris generated by collisions and other fragmentation events. If thousands of new satellites launch every year and are replenished every 5, 10, or 15 years, yet take 25 years to demise once the mission is done, the rate of debris accumulation will grow rapidly, and perhaps unsustainably. More objects remaining in crowded orbits for longer will potentially generate more collisions. Each one of those collisions would generate massive quantities of debris, continuing the cycle.

Thankfully, most new systems in LEO don't need 25 years for post-mission disposal, even above the lowest operational altitudes. And few operators would target 25 years if they shouldered the debris-related external costs of their systems. So with this order, we take the practical step of reducing demise times in LEO to no more than 5 years, a timeframe we know is readily achievable. Compliance with the new rule will bend the curve of debris proliferation. It also will reduce collisions and free up resources that would otherwise go toward trying to avoid them.

The five-year rule, along with our ongoing debris mitigation efforts, also will help us keep the promise of a new space economy marked by accessibility, entrepreneurship, and repeat breakthroughs in efficiency. Those winning characteristics will only persist if we manage the debris problem successfully. Without a safe operating environment, debris risk could escalate from a financial afterthought to a hazard that makes investors think twice, and could complicate operations in a way that slows or limits new space endeavors while driving up per-mission costs. Put simply, well before it makes LEO unusable, orbital debris could erect new barriers to entry in an industry that has innovated tirelessly to remove them. That makes orbital debris a competition problem, in addition to a safety and security problem. In the long run, it doesn't take a worst-case scenario to eliminate the favorable economics of new space.

Finally, as I've often said, our efforts at the FCC do not exist in a vacuum. Earlier this month, NASA funded several academic studies into the economic, social, and policy issues around space debris, and a bipartisan group of Senators also introduced legislation to jumpstart the development of debris removal technology in the United States. I continue to believe that the FCC must work collaboratively throughout government on these issues and that as a nation, we must leverage our collective expertise. But as a licensing authority with no shortage of applications before it, we are right to move forward.

I thank the International Bureau for its hard work on this item.