

OPENING STATEMENT

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Subcommittee on Space
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

“Space Traffic Management: How to Prevent a Real Life ‘Gravity’”

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Good afternoon and welcome to today’s hearing.

Mr. Chairman, while the accuracy of all of the events depicted in the movie “Gravity” can be questioned, there is no doubt it has made the public more aware of the danger of orbital debris.

And that’s a good thing.

The *real* world nature of the danger was brought into stark focus by the aftermath of the 2007 anti-satellite test conducted by China. This incident is said to have created an estimated debris population of 150,000 objects larger than 1 centimeter in size. The resulting increase in space debris has made the space environment more hazardous to military, civil, and commercial satellites and spacecraft for years to come.

So what are we doing to make space travel safe from orbital debris?

Today, a number of government agencies have a role in orbital debris mitigation. Three of those agencies are represented on the panel today:

- DOD’s Strategic Command is responsible for tracking orbital debris.
- FCC has jurisdiction for mitigating orbital debris from satellites.
- And FAA’s Office of Commercial Space Transportation regulates orbital debris from commercially licensed launch and reentry vehicles.

However, what isn’t quite clear is which agencies have or could have legitimate roles in space traffic management—that is, the authority to tell a space operator to move a spacecraft should the potential for collision from debris or another spacecraft require it.

And other questions come to mind:

- Should space traffic management be carried out by one or more existing agencies or perhaps by a new organization?
- What needs to happen for the information on space debris and potential collisions to get to the people who need it and *when* they need it?

- Is the current system for information transfer working, or does it need improvement?
- Because the causes and consequences of orbital debris are international in scope, does successful space traffic management require an international approach?
- And what liability should the agency or agencies in charge of space traffic management assume if its direction to a satellite operator to move a spacecraft results in a collision?

These are just a few of the questions this Subcommittee will need to address if we aim to lay the groundwork for ensuring the safety of future spaceflight from orbital debris and other spacecraft.

Mr. Chairman, these are complex issues.

I hope that our hearing today will start to shed light not only on the important issue of orbital debris but also on the approaches Congress might consider for a potential space traffic management and regulatory regime.