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# United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE,  
AND TRANSPORTATION

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6125

WEBSITE: <https://commerce.senate.gov>

November 29, 2021

The Honorable Gina M. Raimondo  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Commerce  
1401 Constitution Ave. NW  
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Secretary Raimondo:

We are writing regarding the November 15, 2021, Russian anti-satellite test. The debris field that resulted from the Russian test forced U.S. astronauts on the International Space Station to take shelter in their crew return vehicles. According to NASA and the Department of State, because of this test, over 1,500 new objects now threaten U.S. space capabilities. Given the economic and national security importance of consistent access to the space environment, this test provides a stark reminder that the United States must strengthen its capabilities to monitor and respond to space debris.

In the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, the Office of Space Commerce (OSC) and the National Environmental Satellite, Data, and Information Service (NESDIS) are charged with initiating a space traffic management (STM) pilot program, in collaboration with industry and relevant agencies. Congress instructed that this program include an open architecture data repository (OADR), STM technical prototypes, and STM demonstrations and experiments. OSC is demonstrating an OADR prototype, but further progress is needed against these objectives.

In October 2021, the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation Subcommittee on Space and Science held a hearing focused on international cooperation and competition in space, including the need for U.S. leadership to address the challenge of growing congestion and orbital debris. Committee members and witnesses highlighted the important role that the Department of Commerce should play in helping keep the space environment safe for all operators. The hearing further emphasized the Senate's strong bipartisan support for the Department's role in space situational awareness (SSA) and STM. The Senate passed the bipartisan Space Preservation and Conjunction Emergencies (SPACE) Act to codify the Commerce Department's role in providing SSA services for civil, commercial, and international space operators.

Effective leadership and a functioning OADR that incorporates commercial data and capabilities will contribute to the growth of the space economy and improve space safety. These capabilities will support the nation's ability to manage the emergence of new debris fields, such as the debris

field created by the Russian test. Further, these capabilities will help the nation understand and respond to unforeseen disasters in space and play a critical role in protecting U.S. property and personnel. The Committee therefore looks forward to the operationalization of OSC capabilities.

As the Department continues to make progress on these critical issues, we encourage OSC to identify and implement potential lessons learned from the Russian anti-satellite test. While disturbing, this event provides an opportunity to strengthen the Government's ability to respond to future disasters. We ask that the Department of Commerce submit answers to the following questions by December 31, 2021:

- 1) What progress has been made with appointing an OSC Director and fully staffing the office? While the Committee recognizes and appreciates the Department's support of SSA and STM activities, we are concerned that the Office still lacks a Director.
- 2) How will OSC leverage its current and future data gathering and modeling capabilities, to respond to the Russian anti-satellite test and to future space threats? The Committee encourages OSC to demonstrate the potential of the OADR to enable Federal response following events like the anti-satellite test.
- 3) Based on the knowledge gained following this event, what additional resources or authority does OSC require to successfully respond to future space threats and to ensure improved space traffic management and debris mitigation?
- 4) Based on the knowledge gained following this event, what actions can the Department take administratively to elevate the prominence of OSC and to ensure that the Office can demonstrate STM leadership across Federal agencies?

While the Russian actions are disturbing, they are a reminder of the need for U.S. leadership on SSA and STM and provide an opportunity to disseminate lessons learned that will protect U.S. assets and personnel in the future. The Committee looks forward to and encourages continued OSC leadership and to the rapid operationalization of the Office's programs.

Sincerely,



Maria Cantwell  
Chair



Roger F. Wicker  
Ranking Member



John Hickenlooper  
U.S. Senator



Cynthia M. Lummis  
U.S. Senator