



Space Salvage Can Unlock an On-orbit Economy

Enabling Responsible On-Orbit Servicing and ISAM through Legal Frameworks by Addressing Salvage Rights, Liability, and Economic Incentives

Multiple companies around the world are building business cases around the identification, capture, removal, or repurposing of defunct or inactive space objects. The space community is confronted with both the adverse impacts to the space operating environment that debris and defunct objects provide as well as the potential economic value that salvage of some of these space craft could represent. As the business community builds these capabilities out, managing the legal issues involved when objects are defunct or abandoned is becoming timelier. Salvage rights are one analog that is often discussed. However, abandonment and being defunct are not always straightforward. The paper explores multiple scenarios for an ISAM company, analyzing each to determine whether salvage rights might even apply.

Key Insights

- Orbital debris should be understood not merely as a threat but as latent infrastructure awaiting integration into the orbital economy.
- Treating debris as a valuable resource—rather than waste—remediates existing space junk, spurs a new circular space economy, generates novel business opportunities for the space sector, and drives sustainable growth.
- This paper establishes the conceptual and economic rationale for applying salvage principles in space, linking them to sustainability goals and circular economy models.
- This paper also identifies where simple terrestrial law provides sufficient guidance.
- Careful contracting and managed expectations are needed.

Why This Matters

Legal clarity on ISAM is essential for building a circular, sustainable space economy that benefits all humanity.

Session Details

IAC Session: IISL Colloquium on the Law of Outer Space | Sustainability and Outer Space Law

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Presenters

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