



## Pacific Nations Call for Space Junk Dumping Rules

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Special to SPACE.com

posted: 10:54 am ET

06 April 2001

ET

SYDNEY, Australia -- Following the recent splashdown of the Mir space station in the south Pacific, Australia, New Zealand and Chile want international codes of practice drawn up to govern dumping of such space junk in the future.

The three countries are at risk because they inhabit the edges of a vast oceanic area informally known as the "graveyard." The area between New Zealand and Chile has been used for years to drop space junk.

The idea was broached by Chilean officials at a meeting of the Forum for East Asia-Latin America Cooperation (FEALAC) in Santiago, Chile, which ended March 30. New Zealand and Australia, fellow members of the forum, echoed support. The three countries are hoping if they can't nip this space junk dumping practice in the bud they can at least exert greater control over how and when it's done.

While existing treaties cover space junk under secondary rules, such as those governing disposal of hazardous waste and protection of marine environments, the three countries want more explicit rules specifically targeted at space junk, said David Payton, head of the environmental division of New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

These might include increased consultation with potentially affected countries, assurances regarding the nature of falling space junk and more definitive terms of legal liability, the three agreed.

As it turns out, Mir's destruction in the south Pacific on March 23, 2001 took place in textbook fashion, causing little unease in New Zealand, Australia or Chile. But it did underscore that the three nations are in the firing line if this practice continues as the Space Age gears up.

Australia and New Zealand already are scarred veterans of falling space junk. America's out-of-control Skylab crashed into Western Australia in July 1979, while bits of a Russian reentering space research craft, colloquially known as the "Ashburton Balls," fell on New Zealand's South Island in 1972.

In June of last year, the Compton Gamma Ray Observatory that had circled the globe for nearly a decade was dumped in the south Pacific Ocean. And prior to Mir's deorbiting, a number of Progress cargo ships used to resupply the Russian outpost also were dropped there.

The FEALAC forum is intended to forge closer ties between East Asian and Latin American countries, and the late March meeting was attended by representatives of 30 countries. The subject of space junk came up on the margins. No mention of it was included in the official final communiqué issued by the Chilean foreign ministry, but Australia and New Zealand both issued press releases expressing support for the idea.

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### Images



Artist's rendition of space junk surrounding the Earth. Click to enlarge.



Diagram of the proposed Orion Project laser system. A pulsed laser would focus on space debris from the ground, moving it closer to Earth's atmosphere. Click to enlarge.

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