IADC-12-08, Rev. 1
January 2013

Inter-Agency Space Debris Coordination Committee

Stability of the Future LEO Environment

Working Group 2

Action Item 27.1

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Executive Summary

Recent modeling studies of the orbital debris (OD) population in low Earth orbit (LEO, the region below 2000 km altitude) have suggested that the OD mitigation measures commonly adopted by the international space community, including the IADC and the UN, may be insufficient to stabilize the future OD environment. If the instability of the LEO debris population is confirmed, additional measures should be considered to better preserve the near-Earth space environment for future generations.

An official IADC Action Item 27.1, Stability of the Future LEO Environment, was initiated in 2009 to investigate the projected growth of the LEO debris population. Six IADC member agencies, ASI, ESA, ISRO, JAXA, NASA, and UKSA, participated in the study. Results from the six different models are consistent with one another, *i.e.*, even with a 90% compliance of the commonly-adopted mitigation measures, based on the ESA provided initial population of 2009, the LEO debris population is expected to increase by an average of approximately 30% in the next 200 years. Catastrophic collisions will continue to occur every 5 to 9 years. Remediation measures, such as active debris removal, should be considered to stabilize the future LEO environment.

1. Background/Introduction

On-going space activities and the increasing OD population will eventually lead to a collision cascade effect in the near-Earth environment. This "Kessler Syndrome" was predicted by Kessler and Cour-Palais (1978) more than 30 years ago. Recent work has suggested that the current LEO environment has already reached a point where the debris population is unstable and growth will continue in spite of implementing the commonly-adopted mitigation measures (Liou and Johnson, 2006). In response to this new finding, an internal IADC Working Group 2 (WG2) modeling study was conducted in 2008 to assess the stability of the current LEO debris population. Study participants were ASI, BNSC (now UKSA), ESA, JAXA and NASA (Lead). The study's goal was to investigate the stability of the LEO debris environment using the 1 January 2006 population as the initial condition. The 200-year future projection adopted a "best case" scenario where no new launches beyond 1 January 2006 were allowed. At the conclusion of the internal study in March 2009, a follow-up study, based on an updated environment (including fragments from Fengyun-1C, Cosmos 2251, and Iridium 33), a more realistic future lunch traffic cycle, and post-mission disposal implementation, was recommended. The Steering Group (SG) also asked WG2 to designate the follow-up study as an official Action Item, AI 27.1, because of its potential significance.

The objective of AI 27.1 was to assess the stability of the LEO debris population and reach a consensus on the need to use active debris removal (ADR) to stabilize the future environment. Participants included ASI, ESA, ISRO, JAXA, NASA, and UKSA. The study was coordinated and led by NASA. Details of AI 27.1, its outcomes, and recommendations are summarized in this report.

2. Study Principles and Scenario

In order to constrain the many degrees of freedom within the study, some reasonable assumptions were made. First, it was assumed that future launch traffic could be represented by the repetition of the 2001 to 2009 traffic cycle. Second, the commonly-adopted mitigation measures were assumed to be well-implemented. In particular, a compliance of 90% with the post-mission disposal "25-year" rule for payloads (i.e., spacecraft, S/C) and upper stages (i.e., rocket bodies, R/Bs) and a 100% success for passivation (i.e., no future explosions) were assumed. However, collision avoidance maneuvers were not allowed, in keeping with previous WG2 modeling studies. In addition, an 8-year mission lifetime for payloads launched after 1 May 2009 was uniformly adopted.

Each participating member agency was asked to use its own models for solar flux prediction, orbit propagation, and collision probability calculation for the study. These elements are described for each model in later sections. Collision probability calculations were limited to 10 cm and larger objects. The NASA Standard Breakup Model (Johnson et al., 2001) was used by all participants for their future projections, as it was determined that participants did not employ any other fragmentation model. The participants were encouraged to conduct as many Monte Carlo (MC) simulations as time and resources allowed to achieve better statistical results. Finally, the study conclusions were drawn primarily from the average results of each participating model, determined through MC simulations.

The study scenario required models to perform future projections of the 10 cm and larger LEO-crossing population for 200 years past the 1 May 2009 reference epoch. Launch traffic was added to the projection according to the repeated 2001 to 2009 traffic cycle, with 8-year operational lifetimes assumed for payloads. At the end of this 8-year period, 90% of payloads were placed into decay orbits with a nominal, remaining lifetime of 25 years. Where it was determined that a transfer to a graveyard orbit above LEO was cost-effective, objects were removed from the simulation immediately. Rocket bodies launched after 1 May 2009 were also transferred immediately to 25-year decay orbits with the same success rate. Future explosions were not allowed (based on the assumption of good implementation of passivation measures) and collision avoidance maneuvers were not permitted.

3. Initial Population and Model Descriptions

3.1 Initial Population

The initial population used for the study was provided by ESA and was generated using the MASTER-2009 model. The population included all 10 cm and larger LEO-crossing objects on 1 May 2009, although high area-to-mass ratio (A/M) multi-layer insulation fragments were excluded. LEO-crossing objects are those with perigee altitudes below 2000 km. Each object was listed individually and was categorized as either a rocket body, payload, mission-related debris, or fragmentation debris. Launch dates for all rocket bodies, payloads, and mission-related debris launched between 1 May 2001 and 30 April 2009 were also provided by ESA, enabling an 8-year traffic cycle to be generated and repeated for the future projection.

Figure 1 shows the A/M vs. size distribution of the initial population and Figure 2 shows the spatial density distribution as a function of altitude. The fragments produced by the Fengyun-1C fragmentation in January 2007 and the Iridium 33-Cosmos 2251 collision in February 2009 have contributed to the peak in spatial density between 700 km and 1000 km. This altitude band also coincides with significant concentrations of on-orbit mass (Figure 3).

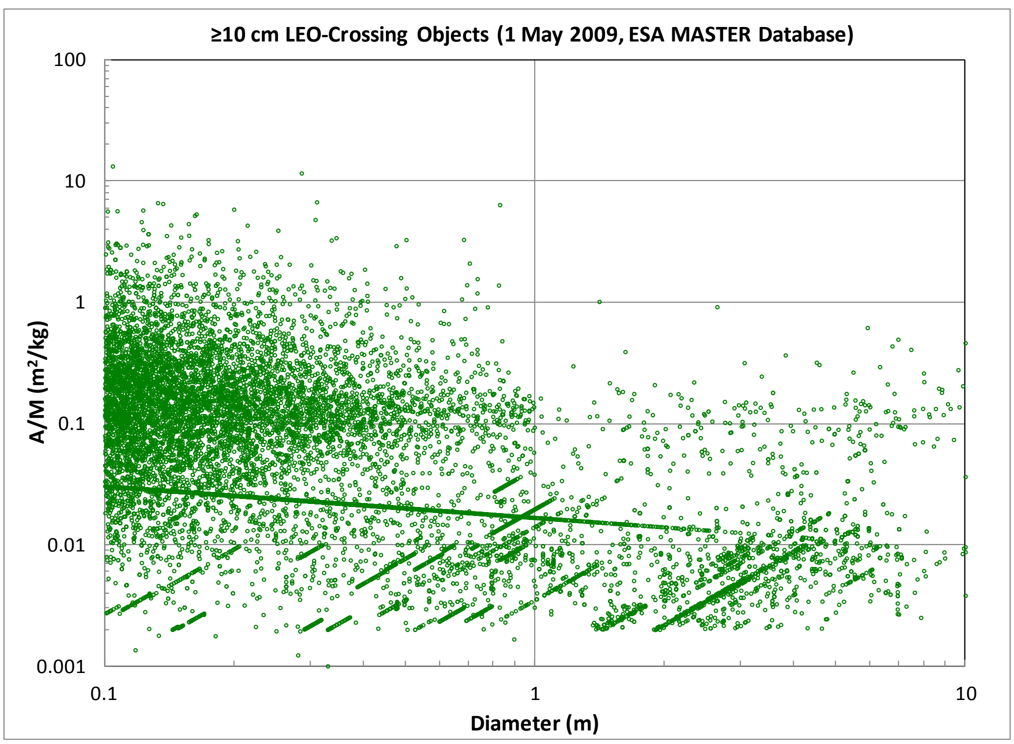

Figure 1. Size vs. A/M distribution of the initial MASTER-2009 population.

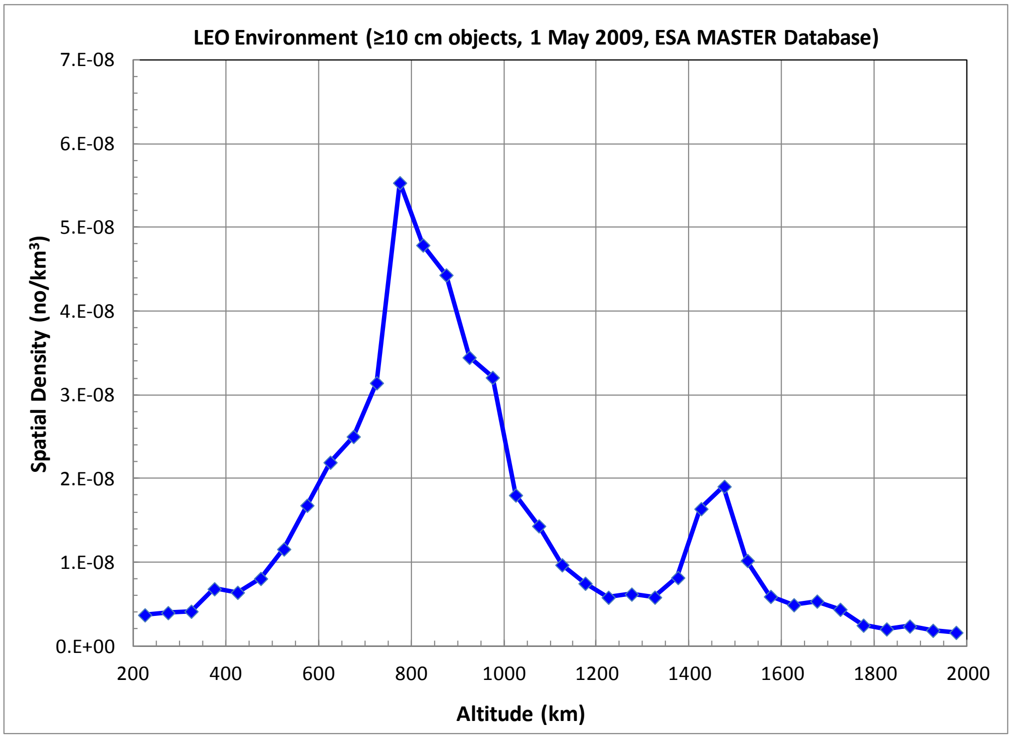

Figure 2. Spatial density of the initial population as a function of altitude.

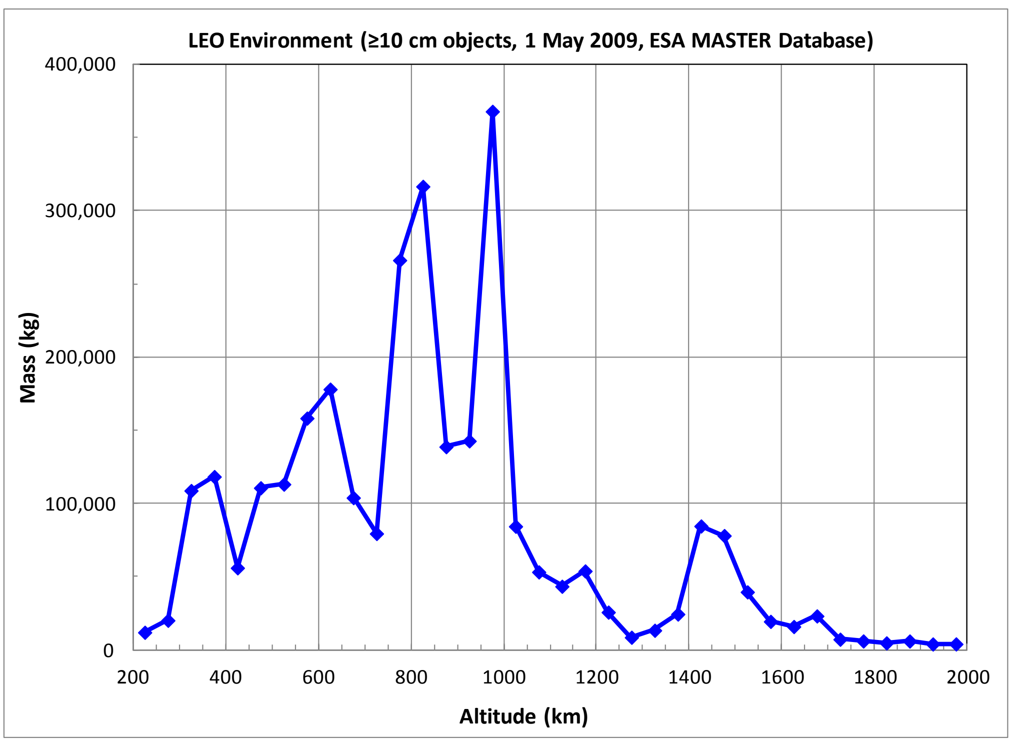

Figure 3. Altitude distribution of on-orbit mass for the initial population.

3.2 ASI Model – SDM

Originally developed in the early 1990s under an ESA Contract, the Space Debris Mitigation long-term analysis program (SDM) recently has been fully revised, redesigned, and upgraded to version 4.1 (Rossi et al., 1994, 2004, 2009a, 2009b). SDM 4.1 was used for AI 27.1. The model is a full three-dimensional LEO to GEO simulation code, including advanced features that make it ideal for long term studies of every orbital regime, with particular attention to the Medium Earth Orbit (MEO) and Geosynchronous orbit (GEO) regions. All the main source and sink mechanisms influencing the orbital debris population down to the size of 1 mm are modeled inside SDM 4.1.

In SDM 4.1 three orbital propagators are implemented and can be selected according to the different orbital regimes and to the accuracy required. SDM 4.1 can use two different approaches to calculate the collision rate between the orbiting objects: the CUBE algorithm, developed at NASA/JSC, and a fully analytical algorithm based on Opik's theory to evaluate the collision probability between objects in LEO. Several models can be used to simulate explosion and collision events, the default one being the NASA Standard Breakup Model.

SDM 4.1 has an extremely detailed traffic model allowing the simulation of complex mitigation scenarios in every orbital regime (including MEO Global Navigation Satellite System, GNSS), constellations management, collision avoidance, and active debris removal.

3.3 ESA Model – DELTA

ESA's Debris Environment Long-Term Analysis (DELTA) software was originally developed by QinetiQ (Walker et al., 2001; Walker and Martin 2004; Martin et al., 2004). DELTA is a three-dimensional, semi-deterministic model, which in its entirety allows a user to investigate the evolution of the orbital debris environment and the associated mission collision risks for the low, medium, and geosynchronous orbit regions. DELTA is able to examine the long-term effects of different future traffic profiles and debris mitigation measures, such as passivation and disposal at end-of-life (Bastida Virgili and Krag, 2009). The most recent available version, v3.0, has been modified to add the active debris removal capabilities. The current version is, therefore, v3.1.

DELTA uses an initial population as input and forecasts all objects larger than 1 mm in size. The population is described by representative objects, evolved with a fast analytical orbit propagator that takes into account the main perturbation sources. The high fidelity of the DELTA model is ensured by using a set of detailed future traffic models for launch, explosion and solid rocket motor firing activity. Each traffic model is based on the historical activity of the eight preceding years. The collision event prediction uses a target-centered approach, developed to stochastically predict impacts for large target objects (mass higher than 50 kg) within the DELTA population. The fragmentation, or break-up, model used is based on the NASA Standard Breakup Model.

3.4 ISRO Model – KSCPROP

ISRO's long-term debris environment projection model is named KSCPROP. Orbit computations in KSCPROP can be carried out for 200 years, revolution by revolution, using the non-singular, fourth-order analytical theory for the motion of near-Earth satellite orbits. The air drag effects are generated in terms of uniformly regular Kustaanheimo and Stiefel (KS) canonical elements. A diurnally-varying oblate atmosphere is considered with constant density scale height. The theory is valid for orbits with eccentricities less than 0.2 (Raj and Sharma 2009). Monthly averaged values of F10.7, also provided for 200 years, are utilized. The secular effects of the Earth's oblateness (J_2) in argument of perigee (ω), right ascension of ascending node (Ω), and long-term perturbations due to J_2 , J_3 , J_4 in eccentricity, are added after every revolution. The Jacchia 1977 atmospheric density model also is utilized to compute the values of the density and density scale height at perigee after every revolution.

Conjunction assessments are carried out by incorporating the apogee-perigee filter, geometric filter, and time filter, based on Hoots et al. (1984). The collisions between any two objects are simulated. The NASA Standard Breakup Model is used to find out the orbital characteristics of the collision fragments. Results of 17074 objects for 200 years were analyzed.

Monte Carlo simulations are carried out by considering various parameter perturbations and also collision probability variations. The parameters considered in MC simulations are ballistic coefficient, F10.7 and Ap with 3 sigma dispersion = + 10%, assuming Gaussian distribution. Other important parameters considered in MC are uncertainties in distribution parameters in breakup model, variations in size, mass, delta velocity of fragments. 40 MC runs Using ISRO parallel computing facility available in Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre. The outputs monitored and analyzed through MC simulations are (1) number of objects decayed at the end of the each year and (2) the orbital parameters of the objects.

3.5 JAXA Model – LEODEEM

JAXA and the Kyushu University (KU) have jointly developed LEODEEM, an orbital debris evolutionary model for the low Earth orbit region. The KU has maintained and operated LEODEEM under contract with JAXA (Hanada et al., 2009).

LEODEEM originally tracked all intact objects such as spacecraft and rocket bodies, whereas mission-related objects and fragmentation debris were binned in perigee and apogee radii and inclination, and were propagated as representative particles randomly selected, to reduce the time needed for long-term projection (Hanada et al., 2009). For AI 27.1, LEODEEM was revised to track individually all objects larger than 10 cm in size.

LEODEEM has adopted an analytical orbit integrator independently developed at KU. Orbit perturbations include the zonal harmonics of the Earth's gravitational attraction (up to four orders), gravitational attractions due to the Sun and Moon, the solar radiation pressure effects, and the atmospheric drag (coupled with solar activities). LEODEEM has adopted the VSOP87 planetary theory to obtain the position of the Sun with respect to the Earth, and the ELP2000 lunar theory to obtain the position of the Moon with respect to the Earth (Narumi and Hanada, 2007).

The probability of collision is estimated for the overlapping portion between the spheres of two colliding objects (Hanada and Yasaka, 2004). Once a collision is identified, LEODEEM generates fragments based on the NASA Standard Breakup Model.

3.6 NASA Model – LEGEND

LEGEND, a LEO-to-GEO Environment Debris model, is the tool used by the NASA Orbital Debris Program Office (ODPO) for long-term debris environment studies (Liou et al., 2004; Liou, 2006). Its recent applications include an investigation of the instability of the debris population in LEO (Liou and Johnson, 2006), and the modeling of the effectiveness of active debris removal (Liou and Johnson 2009; Liou, 2011). The historical component in LEGEND adopts a deterministic approach to mimic the known historical populations. Launched rocket bodies, spacecraft, and mission-related debris are added to the simulated environment based on a comprehensive ODPO internal database. Known historical breakup events are reproduced and fragments are created with the NASA Standard Breakup. The future projection components of LEGEND include a user-specified launch traffic cycle, user-specified mitigation and ADR scenarios, explosions, and collisions. Collision probabilities among orbiting objects are estimated with a fast, pair-wise comparison algorithm (Liou 2006).

Two propagators are used in LEGEND. One is for GEO objects and the other is for LEO and GTO objects. Perturbations included are Earth's J_2, J_3, J_4, solar–lunar gravitational perturbations, atmospheric drag, solar radiation pressure, and Earth's shadow effects. Historical daily solar flux F10.7 values are combined with the J77 atmospheric model for the drag calculation (Jacchia 1977).The solar flux F10.7 values used in the projection period have two components: a short-term projection obtained from the NOAA Space Environment Center and a long-term projection. The latter was a repeat of a sixth-order sine and cosine functional fit to Solar Cycles 18-23.

3.7 UK Space Agency Model – DAMAGE

The University of Southampton's Debris Analysis and Monitoring Architecture for the Geosynchronous Environment (DAMAGE) is a three-dimensional computational model that was initially developed to simulate the debris population in GEO but has since been upgraded to allow investigations of the full LEO to GEO debris environment. DAMAGE has been used to investigate the long-term stability of super-synchronous disposal orbits (Lewis et al., 2004), the effectiveness of different removal criteria for ADR (Lewis et al., 2009a), the implications of space climate change for space debris mitigation (Lewis et al., 2005, 2011a), understanding the effect of debris on spacecraft operations (Lewis et al., 2011b), and for calibrating a Fast Debris Evolution (FADE) model (Lewis et al., 2009b).

DAMAGE is a semi-deterministic model implemented in C++, running under Microsoft Windows and using OpenGL for graphical support. A fast, pair-wise algorithm based on the 'Cube' approach adopted in NASA's LEGEND model (Liou et al., 2004) is used to determine the collision probability for all orbiting objects. DAMAGE makes use of the NASA Standard Breakup Model to generate fragmentation debris arising from collisions and explosions.

DAMAGE employs a fast, semi-analytical orbital propagator to update the orbital elements of objects within the environment. This propagator includes orbital perturbations due to Earth gravity harmonics, J_2, J_3, and $J_{2,2}$, lunisolar gravitational perturbations, solar radiation pressure, and atmospheric drag. The drag model assumes a rotating, oblate atmosphere with density and density scale height values taken from the 1972 COSPAR International Reference Atmosphere (CIRA). Atmospheric density and scale height values are stored as look-up tables within DAMAGE for discrete altitudes and exospheric temperatures, and projected solar activity is described using a sinusoidal model. To obtain solar activity values throughout the projection period, log-linear interpolation is used to extract density and scale height estimates from the look-up tables for the perigees of all objects within the LEO region .

Projections into the future of the debris population ≥10 cm are performed using an MC approach to account for stochastic elements within the model and to establish reliable statistics.

3.8 Solar Flux Projection Models

The solar flux projections used by participating agencies for the period from 2010 through 2060 are shown in Figure 4. There is reasonable correlation in terms of the magnitude and phase. The UK model was adopted by JAXA/KU's LEODEEM for the simulations.

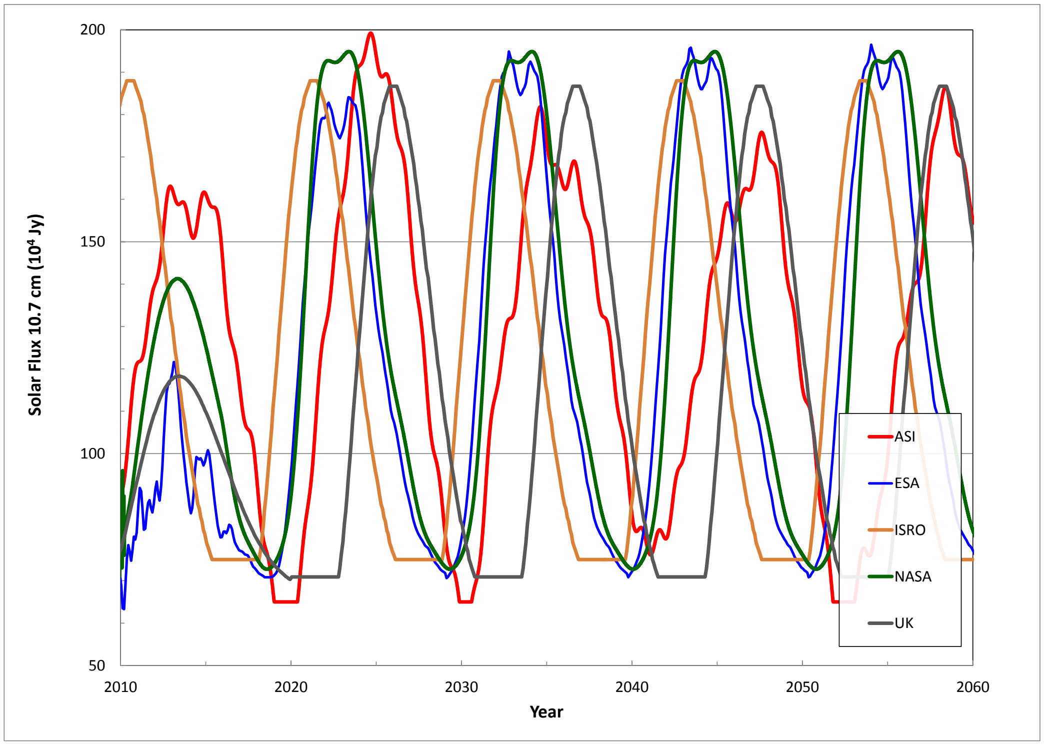

Figure 4. Solar flux projections used by participating agencies for AI 27.1. Only the period from 2010 through 2060 is shown for clarity.

3.9 Model Outputs

Each participant processed their simulation data and provided the study lead with the following results for comparison:

- The effective number of 10 cm or larger objects crossing LEO, separated into three intact categories (rocket bodies, payloads, mission-related objects) and two fragment categories (new fragments generated after 1 May 2009 and old fragments in the initial population) for each projection year. The effective number is defined as the fractional time, per orbital period, an object spends between 200 km and 2000 km altitude. The averages and the 1-sigma standard deviation for the total from the MC runs were provided.

- The Monte Carlo averages for the cumulative number of catastrophic collisions for each projection year. A catastrophic collision is characterized by an impactor kinetic energy-to-target mass-ratio of 40 J/g or higher.

- The spatial density (number of objects per cubic kilometer) of all objects in each 50 km altitude bin from 200 km to 2000 km altitude for the projection years 2009, 2109 and 2209. Again, averages from the Monte Carlo runs were used.

- The average number of catastrophic collisions occurring within each 50 km altitude bin from 200 km to 2000 km altitude during the 200-year projection.

- The effective number of 10 cm and larger objects in LEO in year 2209 for each Monte Carlo run.

4. Study Results

The study results, as described in Section 3.9, are presented below. The number of MC simulations employed by each model to generate these results is shown in Table 1. The total MC runs of the six models is 725.

Table 1. Number of Monte Carlo (MC) simulations performed by participating models.

Agency	ASI	ESA	ISRO	JAXA	NASA	UKSA
Model	SDM	DELTA	KSCPROP	LEODEEM	LEGEND	DAMAGE
MC Runs	275	100	40	60	150	100

4.1 Projected Population Increase

The projections of the total LEO population through the year 2209 from the six models are summarized in Figure 5. In all cases, the models predict a population growth. The average increase is 30% in 200 years. The short-term fluctuation, occurring on a timescale of approximately 11 years, is due to the solar flux cycle (see Section 3.8).

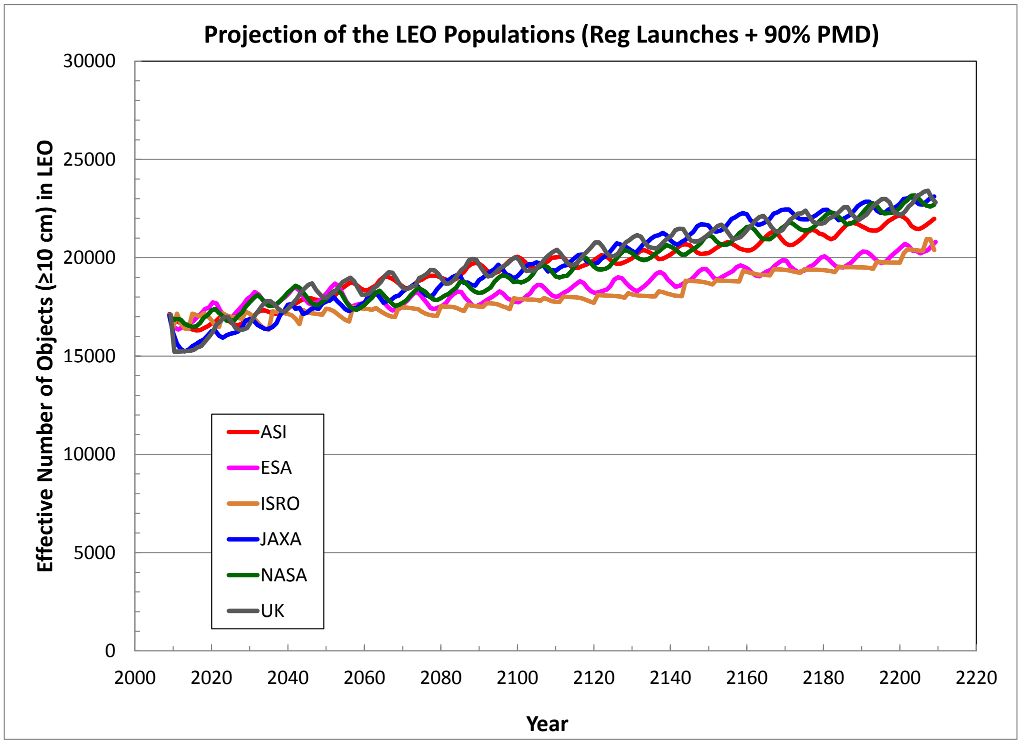

Figure 5. Effective number of objects 10 cm and larger in LEO.

The projection by each individual model, including population breakdown and the 1-sigma standard deviation for the total, is shown below. The general trend is very similar – future population increase in LEO is driven by collision fragments.

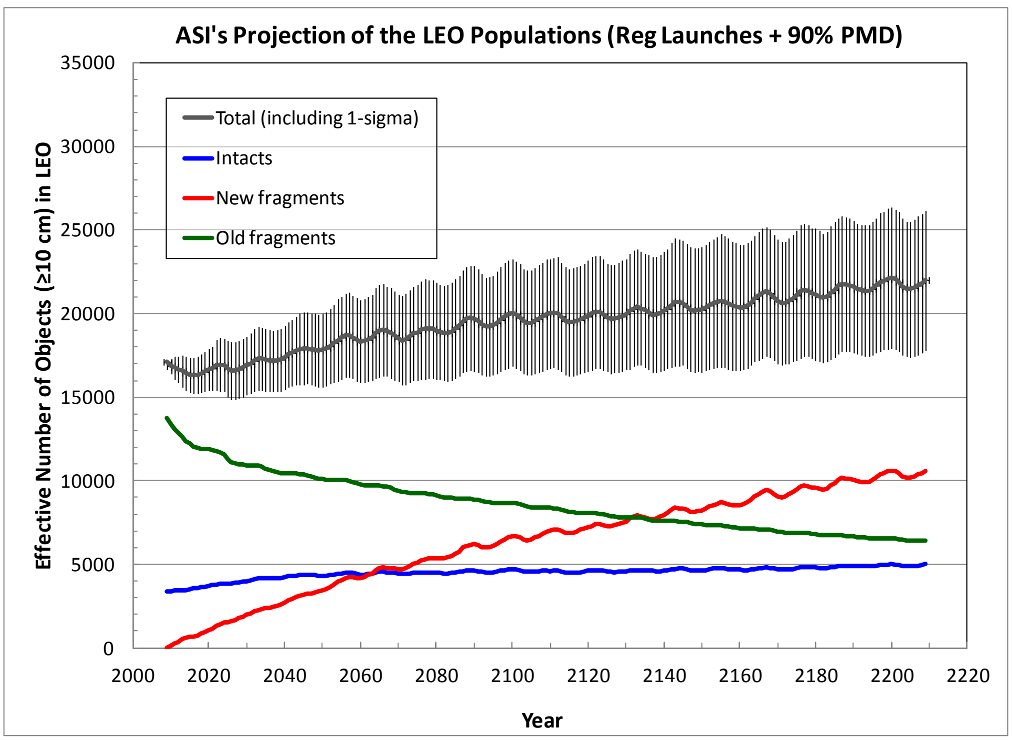

Figure 6. ASI’s projection of the future LEO population.

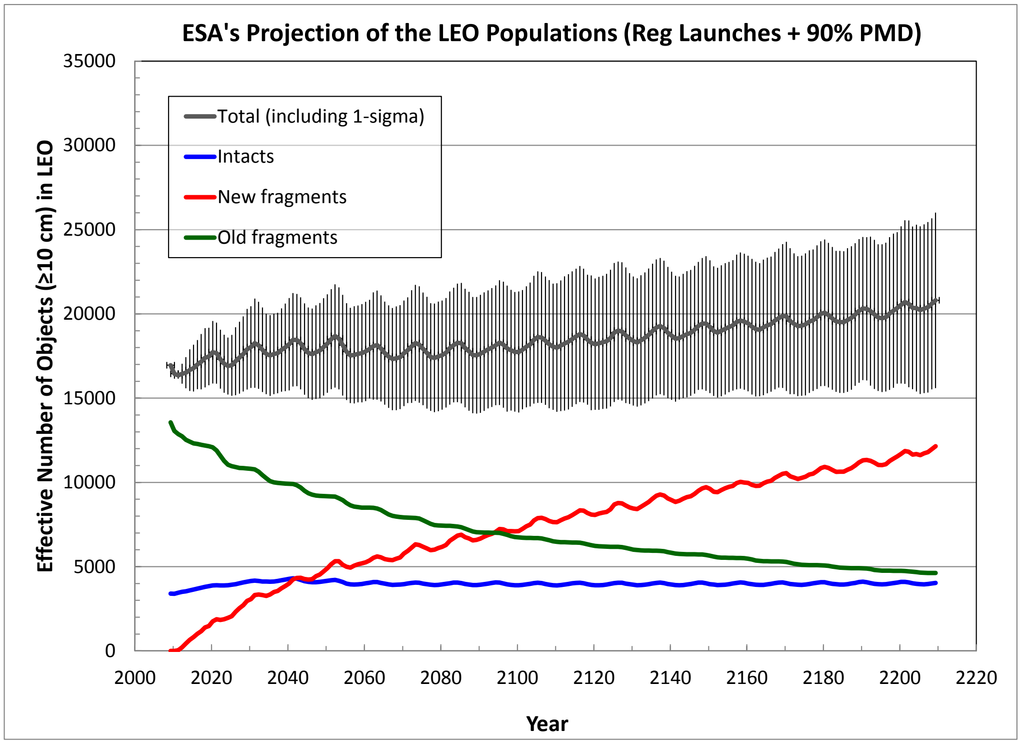

Figure 7. ESA's projection of the future LEO population.

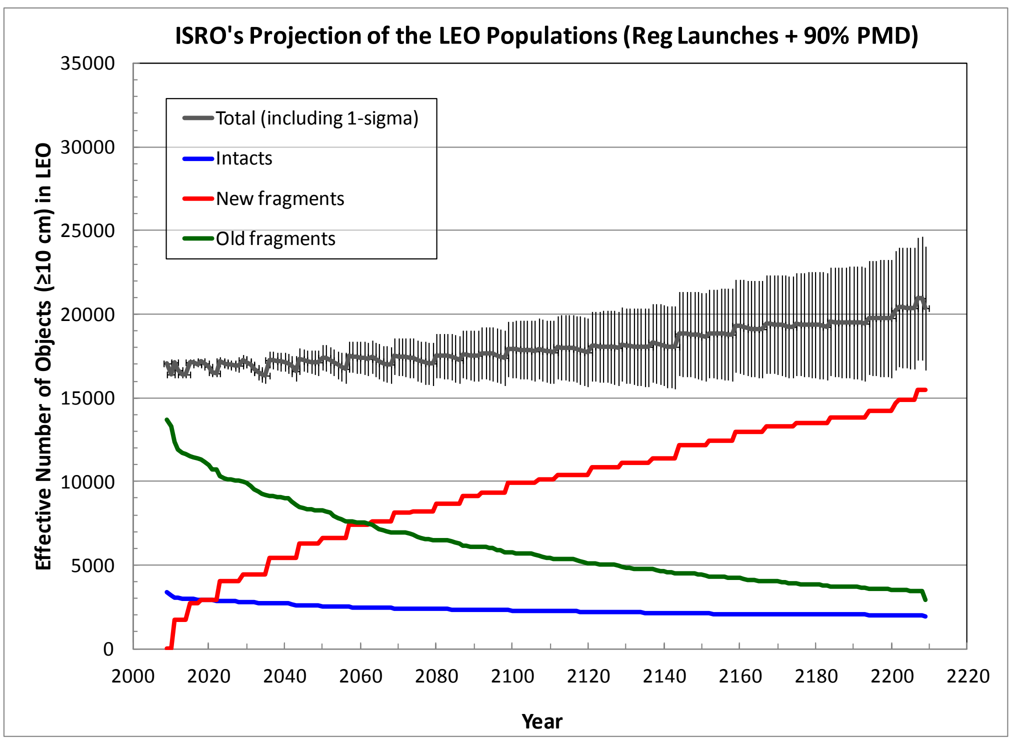

Figure 8. ISRO's projection of the future LEO population.

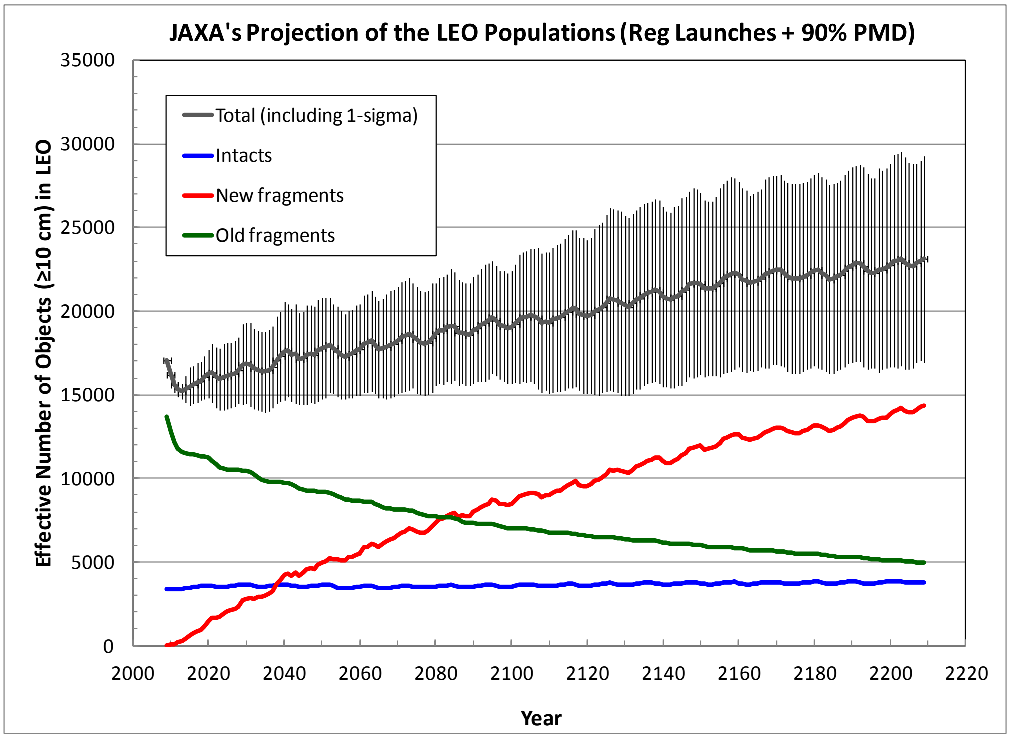

Figure 9. JAXA’s projection of the future LEO population.

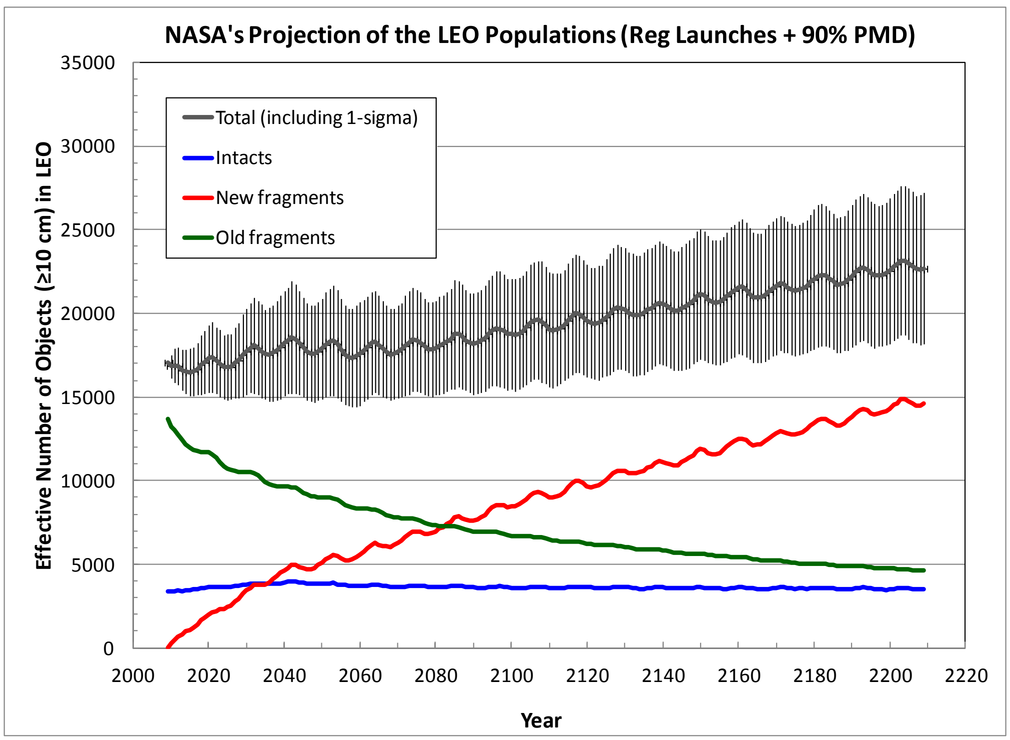

Figure 10. NASA’s projection of the future LEO population.

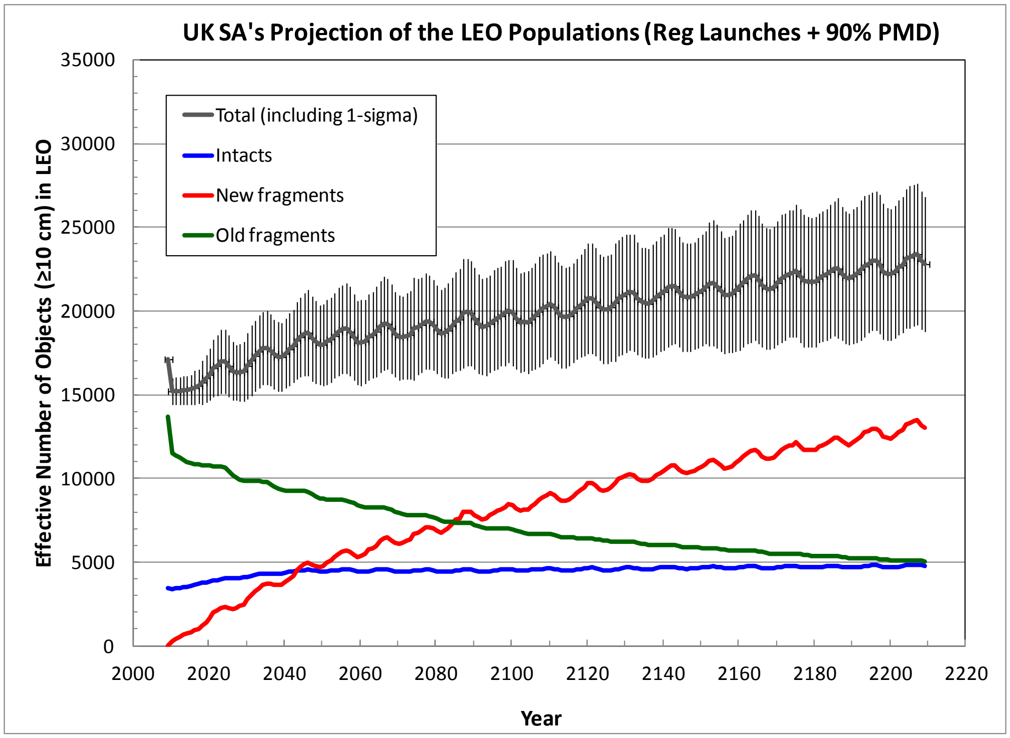

Figure 11. UKSA's projection of the future LEO population.

4.2 Projected Collision Activities in LEO

A catastrophic collision occurs when the ratio of impact energy to target mass exceeds 40 J/g. The outcome of a catastrophic collision is the total breakup of the target, whereas a non-catastrophic collision only results in damage to the target and generates a small amount of debris. Since the main objective of this study is the long-term stability of the debris population, results of non-catastrophic collisions are not included in this report.

Figure 12 shows the cumulative number of catastrophic collisions occurring within the 200-year projection period. Catastrophic collisions, such as the one between Iridium 33 and Cosmos 2251 in 2009, result in the complete fragmentation of the objects involved and generate a significant amount of debris. They are the main driver for future population increases. The steepest curve (UKSA) represents a catastrophic collision frequency of one event every 5 years, whereas the shallowest curve (ISRO) represents a frequency of one event every 9 years. All model predictions for catastrophic collisions show a good fit with a straight line for the next 200 years (average correlation coefficient = 0.99). Catastrophic collisions occur primarily at altitudes of 700-800 km, 900-1000 km, and to a lesser extent, around 1400 km (Figure 13).

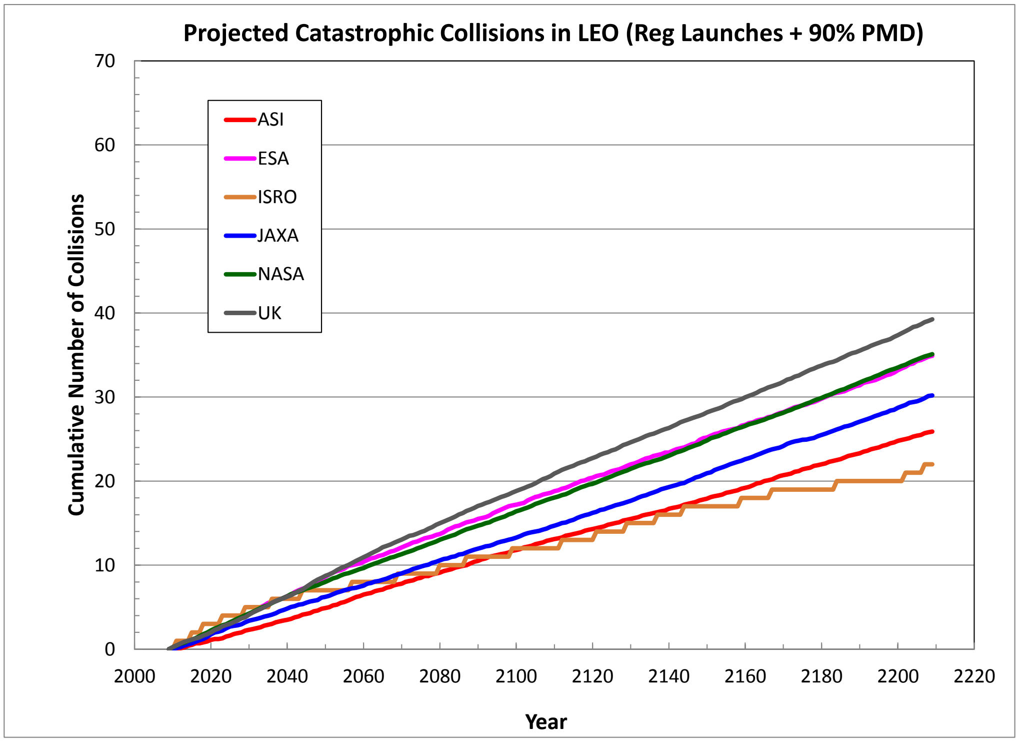

Figure 12. Cumulative number of catastrophic collisions.

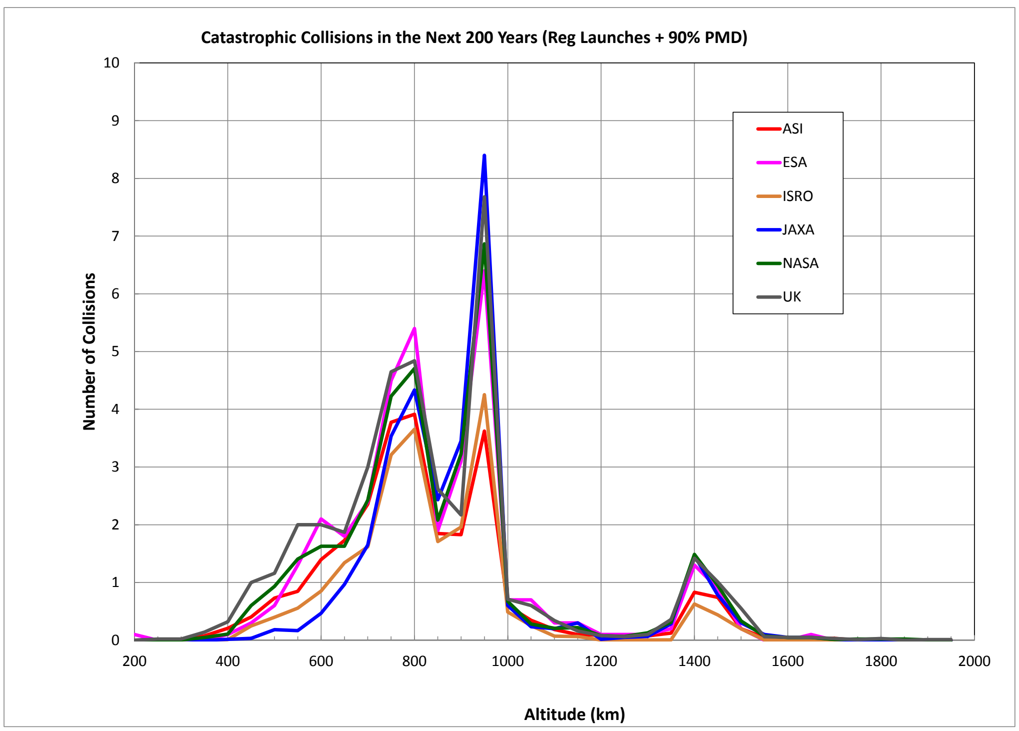

Figure 13. Altitude distribution of all catastrophic collisions in the next 200 years.

4.3 Projected Environment

The population increases in altitude for year 2109 and year 2209 are shown in Figures 14 and 15, respectively. The initial environment (year 2209) is also included for comparison. The number of objects at any altitude, at a given point in time, is a balance between sources and sink. The former includes new launches, fragments generated from new collisions, and fragments decayed from higher altitudes (due to atmospheric drag) while the latter includes objects decayed toward lower altitudes (due to atmospheric drag). Overall, there is a general population increase above 800 km altitude.

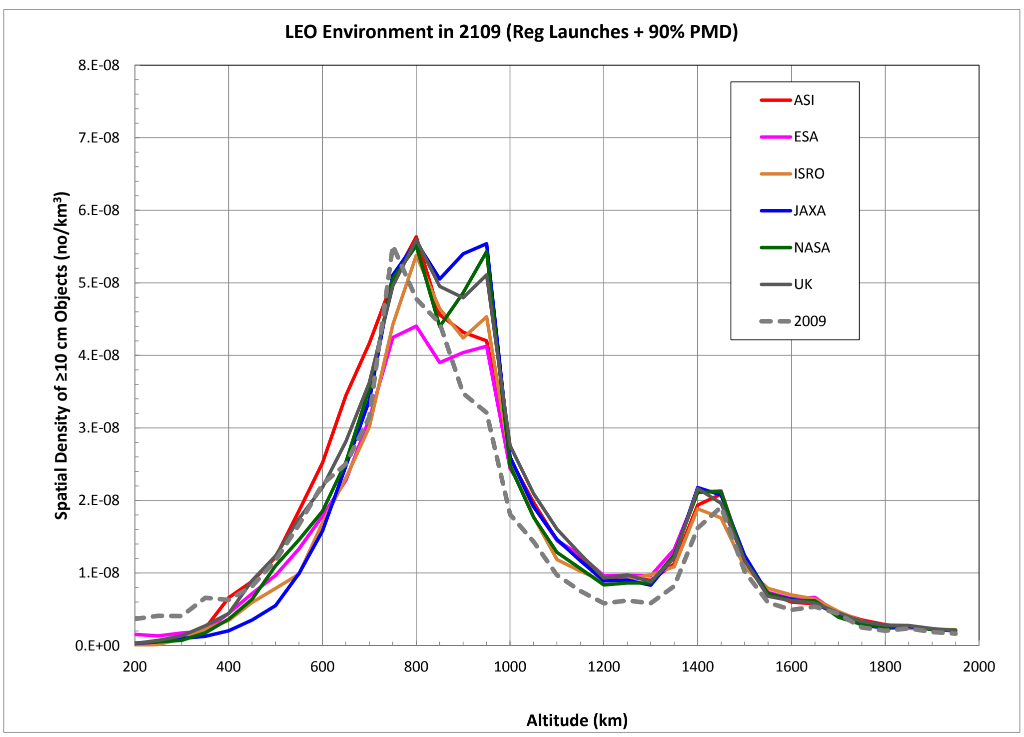

Figure 14. The initial and projected LEO environment in year 2109.

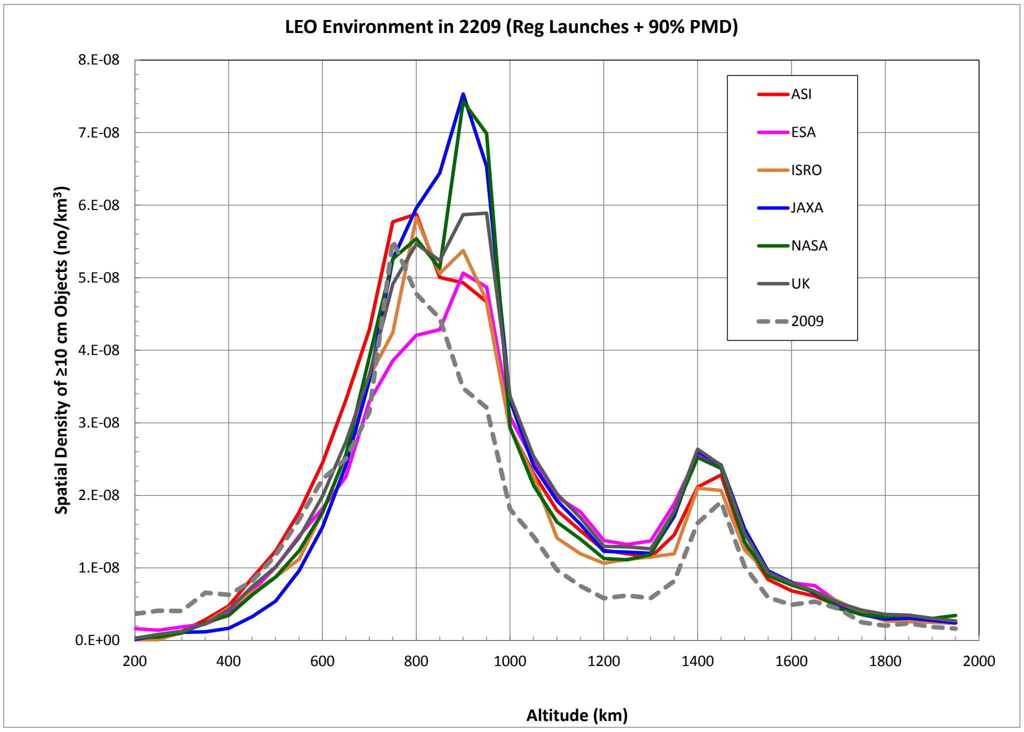

Figure 15. The initial and projected LEO environment in year 2209.

4.4 Monte Carlo Analyses

Table 2 provides additional details of the model predictions. Of the 725 MC simulations, 633 (87%) resulted in a net population increase in 200 years. The spread of the individual MC predictions in year 2209 is shown in Figure 16. The overall MC average is a 30% increase in 200 years.

Table 2. Summary of the projected LEO population increase, based on regular launches and a 90% compliance of the commonly-adopted mitigation measures.

Agency	ASI	ESA	ISRO	JAXA	NASA	UKSA	All
Model	SDM	DELTA	KSCPROP	LEODEEM	LEGEND	DAMAGE	–
MC Runs	275	100	40	60	150	100	725
% of MC runs with $N_{2209}>N_{2009}$	88% (242/275)	75% (75/100)	90% (36/40)	88% (53/60)	89% (133/150)	94% (94/100)	87% (633/725)
Average Change in Population by 2209	+29%	+22%	+19%	+36%	+33%	+33%	+30%

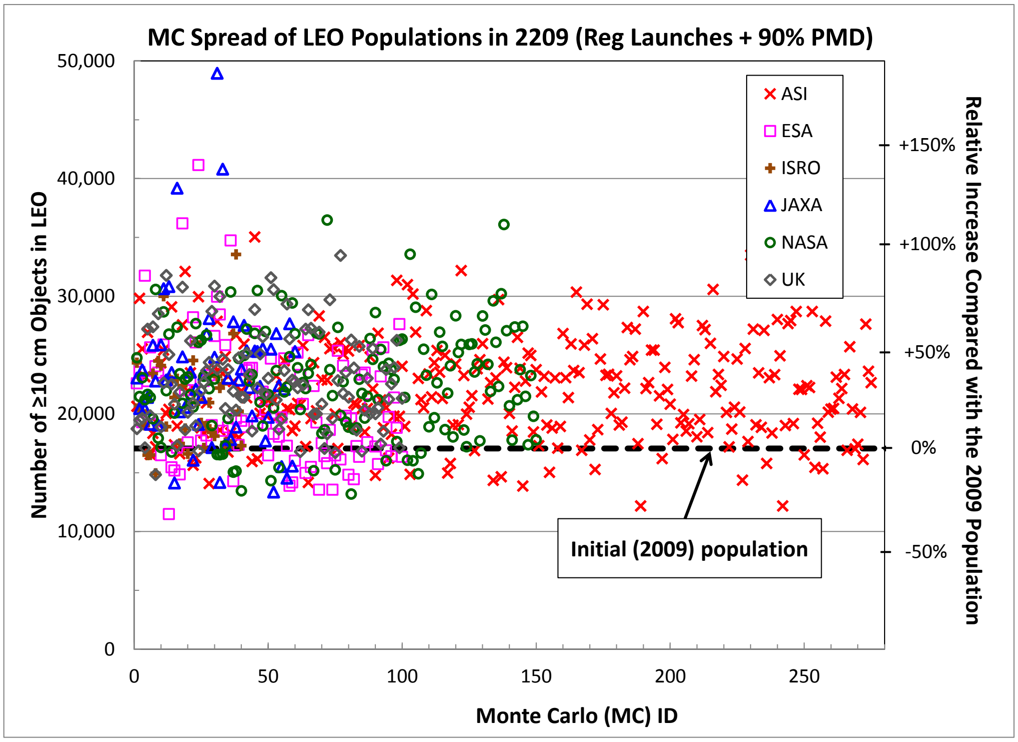

Figure 16. Spread of the MC predictions of the year 2209 LEO population.

5. Summary

The WG2 initiated AI 27.1 in 2009 to investigate the stability of the debris population in LEO. Six member agencies, ASI, ESA, ISRO, JAXA, NASA, and UKSA, participated in the study. The initial OD population (objects 10 cm and larger) for the year 2009 and a nominal future launch traffic cycle were defined and provided by ESA. Each participating member then used their own models to simulate the future environment, assuming nominal launches and a 90% compliance of the commonly-adopted mitigation measures, through year 2209. A total of 725 MC runs were carried out. Analyses of the results indicate that the six model predictions are consistent with one another. Even with a 90% implement-ation of the commonly-adopted mitigation measures, based on the ESA provided initial population of 2009, the LEO debris population is expected to increase by an average of 30% in the next 200 years. The population growth is primarily driven by catastrophic collisions between 700 and 1000 km altitudes and such collisions are likely to occur every 5 to 9 years.

The AI 27.1 results confirm the instability of the current LEO debris population. They also highlight two key elements for the long-term sustainability of the future LEO environment. First, compliance of the mitigation measures, such as the 25-year rule, is the first defense against the OD population increase. The need for a full compliance must be emphasized. The 90%-compliance assumption made in the simulations is certainly higher than the current reality. If the international space community cannot reach this level soon, future debris population growth will be far worse than the AI 27.1 study results, and it will certainly make future OD environment management much more difficult. Second, to stabilize the LEO environment, more aggressive measures, such as active debris removal, should be considered. Remediation of the environment after more than 50 years of space activities is complex, difficult, and will likely require a tremendous amount of resources and international cooperation. The international community should initiate an effort to investigate the benefits of environment remediation, explore various options, and support the development of the most cost-effective technologies in preparation for actions to better preserve the near-Earth environment for future generations.

6. References

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7. Acknowledgement

B. Bastida Virgili contributed to the ESA simulations and analyses. M. Mutyala Rao, and R. K. Sharma contributed to the ISRO simulations and analyses.

8. Definitions and Acronyms

A/M	Area-to-Mass Ratio
ADR	Active Debris Removal
AI	Action Item
ASI	Agenzia Spaziale Italiana
BNSC	British National Space Centre (replaced by UKSA in 2010)
CIRA	COSPAR International Reference Atmosphere
DAMAGE	Debris Analysis and Monitoring Architecture for the Geosynchronous Environment (UKSA)
DELTA	Debris Environment Long-Term Analysis model (ESA)
ESA	European Space Agency
FADE	Fast Debris Evolution
GEO	Geosynchronous Orbit
GNSS	Global Navigation Satellite System
IADC	Inter-Agency Space Debris Coordination Committee
ISRO	Indian Space Research Organisation
JAXA	Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency
KSCPROP	KS Canonical Propagation model (ISRO)
KU	Kyushu University
LEGEND	LEO-to-GEO Environment Debris model (NASA)
LEO	Low Earth Orbit (the region below 2000 km altitude)
LEODEEM	LEO Debris Evolutionary Model (JAXA)
MC	Monte Carlo
MEO	Medium Earth Orbit
NASA	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
NOAA	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
OD	Orbital Debris
ODPO	Orbital Debris Program Office
R/B	Rocket Body (i.e., upper stage)
S/C	Spacecraft (i.e., payloads)
SDM	Space Debris Mitigation long-term analysis program (ASI)

SG	Steering Group
UKSA	United Kingdom Space Agency
WG	Working Group