Statement by Kevin Conole, United States Representative,
on Agenda Item 11, "Near-Earth Objects,"
February 10, 2023

Thank you, Chair. The United States appreciates the opportunity to share its most recent activities for discovery and research on Near-Earth Objects, or NEOs. The NASA Planetary Defense Coordination Office leads U.S. efforts to detect, track and study hazardous NEOs. This office would also lead coordination of efforts by the U.S. Government for a response to any impact threat, working closely with our international partners.

International efforts led by NASA-sponsored NEO search teams have discovered more than 31,000 near-Earth asteroids of all sizes, the orbits of which could allow relatively close approaches to Earth. Last year the NASA-sponsored Asteroid Terrestrial-impact Last Alert System, or ATLAS, team at the University of Hawaii built two new ATLAS observatories in Chile and South Africa in collaboration with institutions in those countries, expanding NEO survey capability in the southern hemisphere.

Last September, the NASA Double Asteroid Redirection Test (or DART) mission successfully demonstrated that the path of an asteroid through space can be changed using a kinetic impactor: a spacecraft that is deliberately crashed into the asteroid at high speed. DART was humanity's first attempt to perceptibly alter the motion of a celestial body, and that alteration was measured using telescopes on Earth, many that are operated by international partners. This test, conducted on an asteroid that does not pose any danger to Earth, showed that kinetic impact is a viable technique that could be deployed someday to prevent an asteroid from hitting the Earth, should an asteroid on an Earth-impacting trajectory ever be discovered. Planetary defense is an international concern; DART carried a CubeSat contributed by Italy which captured spectacular images of the impact, and the DART team drew on expertise from around the world to evaluate the mission's results and enable planning for future planetary defense efforts.

Chair, the United States actively contributes to the International Asteroid Warning Network, or IAWN, and the Space Mission Planning Advisory Group, or SMPAG. These groups provide a strong foundation for international cooperation among space agencies and scientific and technical institutes to detect and deal with the natural impact hazard.

Last February, representatives of U.S. government agencies participated in its most extensive tabletop exercise that involved a hypothetical NEO impact scenario. The Planetary Defense Conferences have also included such NEO impact scenarios for collaboration among international colleagues on hypothetical responses. We are pleased that UNOOSA is hosting the 8th Planetary Defense Conference at the Vienna International Center in April of this year and look forward to participating.

Chair, the United States continues to implement its Action Plan for the U.S. National NEO Preparedness Strategy. Like other space-related U.S. national policies, the NEO Strategy specifically mentions the importance of the work of the UN Committee on the Peaceful Use of Outer Space and its subcommittees. The United States continues its efforts to detect and avoid the rare but potentially globally devastating effects of an asteroid impact. We look forward to increased international cooperation to address the impact hazard from space through participation in IAWN and SMPAG. These groups are thriving with a growing number of members as our scientific, NEO-related coordination continues to improve. Thank you, Chair.