

## This Startup Just Built A New Radar System To Track Space Junk

Space is getting increasingly crowded. There are nearly 2,000 active satellites in Earth's orbit—and close to another 2,800 inactive ones. By 2030, there's a good chance that number will pass [20,000](#). This massive increase raises the risk of collisions that could damage or destroy satellites, potentially leading to millions of dollars' worth of losses.

LeoLabs aims to reduce that risk. The Menlo Park, California, startup announced Monday that its third radar installation, in New Zealand, will allow the company to better track objects in space—even objects as small as 2 centimeters. The company is currently tracking 13,000 objects in orbit—with the new installation, it says it will soon be able to track over 200,000.

The company was founded in 2016 as a spinout of research conducted at SRI International. While working on radio astronomy there, founder and CEO Dan Ceperley says he kept getting requests from small satellite operators to help them locate their satellites more precisely. To help do that, his team relied on technology that had been developed by astronomers to filter out space debris and satellites from their scientific data. By flipping that technique around, Ceperley found a way to track both.

LeoLabs already has radar installations in Alaska, Texas and New Zealand, and Ceperley wants to have six installations in all. The company has raised \$19 million in venture backing to build out its software and radar infrastructure, and it's done so much less expensively than similar projects by governments, such as the Air Force's Space Fence, which cost over \$1.5 billion to complete.

"This is the right thing at the right time," explains Chad Anderson, whose company Space Angels is an investor in LeoLabs. "It's addressing a really big and growing need. The success of this company is going to drive success of space economy as a whole."

To bring data about satellites and debris to its customers, LeoLabs offers an off-the-shelf subscription software package, LeoTrack. It also creates custom software. There's a lot of interest—in addition to satellite operators and government agencies, insurance companies are also keenly interested in this data to support their operations. Demand should grow as more businesses build products that include space-based services such as imagery, radar or internet communications.

"We have positioned LeoLabs as a platform," says Ceperley. "So we're producing all these data services and rapidly working with partners and other companies who are building their own software on top of the LeoLabs platform. They're building applications that take the data over into very specific markets. We think we're enabling an entirely new portion of the space ecosystem."

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