manage its credit exposures to its clearing members by better aligning each clearing member’s contributions to the credit risk it poses to OCC, thereby allowing OCC to better manage its credit exposures to its participants.

Accordingly, based on the foregoing, the Commission believes that the proposed changes pertaining to the sizing, monitoring, and allocation of clearing fund requirements are consistent with Exchange Act Rule 17Ad–22(e)(4).137

C. Consistency With Rule 17Ad–22(e)(1) Under the Exchange Act

Rule 17Ad–22(e)(1) under the Exchange Act requires that OCC establish, implement, maintain, and enforce written policies and procedures reasonably designed to provide for a well-founded, clear, transparent, and enforceable legal basis for each aspect of its activities in all relevant jurisdictions.138 The Commission has stated that, in establishing and maintaining policies and procedures to address legal risk, a covered clearing agency generally should consider whether its rules, policies and procedures, and contracts are clear, understandable, and consistent with relevant laws and regulations.139

The Commission believes that the proposed consolidation and reorganization of OCC’s Rules described above would improve readability by locating all rules related to the clearing fund in one place, thereby enhancing the clarity, transparency, consistency, and understandability of OCC’s Rules related to the clearing fund. Additionally, by amending the Rules to accurately reflect OCC’s current margin practices, the Commission believes OCC’s Rules will be more transparent and understandable.

Accordingly, the Commission believes that the proposed textual reorganization and clarifications are consistent with Rule 17Ad–22(e)(1).140

V. Conclusion

It is therefore noticed, pursuant to Section 806(e)(1)(I) of the Payment Supervision Act, that the Commission does not object to Advance Notice (SR–OCC–2018–803) and that OCC is authorized to implement the proposed change.

By the Commission.
Robert W. Errett,
Deputy Secretary.

SECURITIES AND EXCHANGE COMMISSION


Self-Regulatory Organizations; Bats BZX Exchange, Inc.; Order Setting Aside Action by Delegated Authority and Disapproving a Proposed Rule Change, as Modified by Amendments No. 1 and 2, To List and Trade Shares of the Winklevoss Bitcoin Trust

July 26, 2018.

I. Introduction

On June 30, 2016, Bats BZX Exchange, Inc. ("BZX") filed a proposed rule change with the Commission, seeking to list and trade shares of the Winklevoss Bitcoin Trust.1 The Commission, acting through authority delegated to the Division of Trading and Markets,2 disapproved the proposed rule change on March 10, 2017,3 and BZX then filed a timely petition seeking Commission review of the disapproval by delegated authority.4 The Commission granted BZX’s Petition for Review, seeking public comments in support of or in opposition to the March Disapproval Order.5 Today’s order sets aside the March Disapproval Order, and, for the reasons discussed below, disapproves BZX’s proposed rule change.6 In response to BZX’s Petition for Review, the Commission has conducted a de novo review of BZX’s proposal7—giving careful consideration to the entire record, including BZX’s amended proposal and Petition for Review and all comments and statements submitted by BZX and other persons—to determine whether the proposal is consistent with the requirements of the Exchange Act and the rules and regulations issued thereunder that are applicable to a national securities exchange.8 Specifically, the Commission has considered whether BZX’s proposal is consistent with Exchange Act Section 6(b)(5), which requires, in relevant part, that the rules of a national securities exchange be designed “to prevent fraudulent and manipulative acts and practices” and “to protect investors and the public interest.”9

Under the Commission’s Rules of Practice, the “burden of demonstrating that a proposed rule change is consistent with the Exchange Act and the rules and regulations issued

137 Id.
138 17 CFR 240.17Ad–22(e)(1).
139 Covered Clearing Agency Standards at 70802.
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The Commission addresses each of these arguments below. In Section III.B, the Commission addresses BZX’s assertion that bitcoin and bitcoin markets, including the Gemini Exchange, are uniquely resistant to manipulation and finds that the record before the Commission does not support such a conclusion. In Section III.C, the Commission addresses whether what BZX describes as “traditional means” of identifying and deterring fraud and manipulation are sufficient to meet the requirements of Exchange Act Section 6(b)(5) and also finds that the record does not support such a conclusion. Then, in Sections III.D and III.E, respectively, the Commission addresses the use and importance of surveillance-sharing agreements to detect and deter fraud and manipulation, and whether BZX has entered into a comprehensive surveillance-sharing agreement with a regulated market of significant size related to bitcoin. Although surveillance-sharing agreements are not the exclusive means by which an ETP listing exchange can meet its obligations under Exchange Act Section 6(b)(5), such agreements are a widely used means for exchanges that list ETPs to meet their obligations, and the Commission has historically recognized their importance. And where, as here, a listing exchange fails to establish that other means to prevent fraudulent and manipulative acts and practices will be sufficient, the listing exchange must enter into a surveillance-sharing agreement with a regulated market of significant size because “such agreements provide a necessary deterrent to manipulation because they facilitate the availability of information needed to fully investigate a manipulation if it were to occur.” Based on the record before it, the Commission concludes that—unlike the listing exchanges for previously approved commodity-trust ETPs—BZX has not established that it has entered into, or currently could enter into, a surveillance-sharing agreement with a regulated market of significant size related to bitcoin.

Finally, in Section III.F, the Commission addresses arguments raised regarding the protection of investors and the public interest, and, in Section III.G, the Commission discusses additional factors supporting disapproval of the BZX proposal.

Although the Commission is disapproving this proposed rule change, the Commission emphasizes that its disapproval does not rest on an evaluation of whether bitcoin, or blockchain technology more generally, has utility or value as an innovation or an investment. Rather, the Commission is disapproving this proposed rule change because, as discussed in detail below, BZX has not met its burden under the Exchange Act and the Commission’s Rules of Practice to demonstrate that its proposal is consistent with the requirements of the Exchange Act Section 6(b)(5), in particular the requirement that its rules be designed to prevent fraudulent and manipulative acts and practices.

While the record before the Commission indicates that a substantial majority of bitcoin trading occurs on unregulated venues overseas that are relatively new and that, generally, appear to trade only digital assets, and while the record does not support a conclusion that bitcoin derivatives markets have attained significant size, the Commission notes that regulated bitcoin-related markets are in the early stages of their development. Over time, regulated bitcoin-related markets may continue to grow and develop. For example, existing or newly created bitcoin futures markets may achieve significant size, and an ETP listing exchange may be able to demonstrate in a proposed rule change that it will be able to address the risk of fraud and manipulation by sharing surveillance information with a regulated market of significant size related to bitcoin, as well as, where appropriate, with the spot markets underlying relevant bitcoin derivatives. Should these circumstances develop, or conditions otherwise change in a manner that affects the Exchange Act analysis, the Commission would then have the opportunity to consider whether a bitcoin ETP would be consistent with the requirements of the Exchange Act.

11 See id.
12 See id.
13 See Letter from Joanne Moffic-Silver, Executive Vice President, General Counsel & Corporate Secretary, BZX, at 12 (May 15, 2017) (“BZX Letter II”).
14 Id.
15 Id. at 26.
16 Id.
17 See id. at 22.
18 See id. at 26-27.
19 The Commission considers two markets that are members of the Intermarket Surveillance Group to have a comprehensive surveillance-sharing agreement with one another, even if they do not have a separate bilateral surveillance-sharing agreement.
20 See Section III.D.2(a), infra.
22 For example, the Registration Statement for the Winklevoss Bitcoin Trust discloses that “[t]he Bitcoin Exchanges on which Bitcoin trades are new and, in most cases, largely unregulated.” See Registration Statement on Form S–1, as amended, dated February 8, 2017, at 22 (File No. 333-189752) (“Registration Statement”). See also Sections III.E.1 and III.E.2, infra (discussing the distribution of bitcoin trading and the state of regulation of bitcoin spot markets).
23 See infra notes 312–316 and accompanying text.
II. Description of the Proposal

BZX proposes to list and trade shares ("Shares") of the Winklevoss Bitcoin Trust ("Trust") as Commodity-Based Trust Shares under BZX Rule 14.11(e)(4)(C) permits the listing and trading of "Commodity-Based Trust Shares," which are defined as a security (a) that is issued by a trust; (b) that is issued by the trust in a specified minimum number, may be redeemed at a holder's request by the trust, which will deliver to the redeeming holder the quantity of the underlying commodity; (c) is a digital asset that is issued and transferred via a decentralized, open-source protocol used by a peer-to-peer computer network through which transactions are recorded on a public transaction ledger known as the "Blockchain." The Bitcoin protocol governs the creation of new bitcoins and the cryptographic system that secures and verifies bitcoin transactions. See Amendment No. 1, supra note 1, 81 FR at 76652. The proposed rule change describes the ETP's underlying bitcoin asset as a "digital asset" and as a "commodity," see id. at 76652 & n.21, and describes the ETP as a Commodity-Based Trust. For the purpose of considering this proposal, this order describes a bitcoin as a "digital asset" and a "commodity." 

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Bitcoins are digital assets that are issued and transferred via a decentralized, open-source protocol used by a peer-to-peer computer network through which transactions are recorded on a public transaction ledger known as the "Blockchain." The Bitcoin protocol governs the creation of new bitcoins and the cryptographic system that secures and verifies bitcoin transactions. See Amendment No. 1, supra note 1, 81 FR at 76652. The proposed rule change describes the ETP's underlying bitcoin asset as a "digital asset" and as a "commodity," see id. at 76652 & n.21, and describes the ETP as a Commodity-Based Trust. For the purpose of considering this proposal, this order describes a bitcoin as a "digital asset" and a "commodity." 

Indicative Value ("IV") of the Trust would be calculated and disseminated by the Sponsor, every 15 seconds during BZX's regular trading session, based on the most recent Gemini Auction Price. BZX represents that it has entered into a comprehensive surveillance-sharing agreement with the Gemini Exchange. Further details regarding the proposal and the Trust can be found in Amendments No. 1 and 2 to the proposal, supra note 1, and in the registration statement for the Trust. 

III. Discussion

A. Overview

The comment period for the proposed rule change filed by BZX ended November 25, 2016. The Commission, as of March 10, 2017, received 66 comment letters on the proposed rule change. 

The investment objective of the Trust would be for the Shares to track the price of bitcoin on the Gemini Exchange, which is a digital-asset exchange owned and operated by the Gemini Trust Company.29 The Net Asset Value ("NAV") of the Trust would be calculated each business day, based on the clearing price of that day's 4:00 p.m. Eastern Time ("ET") Gemini Exchange bitcoin auction, a two-sided auction open to all Gemini Exchange customers ("Gemini Auction").30 The Intraday Value ("IV") of the Trust would be calculated and disseminated by the Sponsor, every 15 seconds during BZX's regular trading session, based on the most recent Gemini Auction Price.31 BZX represents that it has entered into a comprehensive surveillance-sharing agreement with the Gemini Exchange. Further details regarding the proposal and the Trust can be found in Amendments No. 1 and 2 to the proposal, supra note 1, and in the registration statement for the Trust.32

B. Discussion

The proposal is a natural evolution of the market for bitcoin derivatives. The Sponsor, through its relationship with the Gemini Exchange, is able to provide a mechanism for investors to access bitcoin in a regulated and transparent manner. The Trust holds a specified commodity, which is bitcoin, in a specified minimum number. 

The Trust would issue and redeem the Shares and only to "Authorized Participants," and these transactions would be conducted "in-kind" for bitcoin only.28 The investment objective of the Trust would be for the Shares to track the price of bitcoin on the Gemini Exchange, which is a digital-asset exchange owned and operated by the Gemini Trust Company.29 The Net Asset Value ("NAV") of the Trust would be calculated each business day, based on the clearing price of that day's 4:00 p.m. Eastern Time ("ET") Gemini Exchange bitcoin auction, a two-sided auction open to all Gemini Exchange customers ("Gemini Auction").30 The Intraday Value ("IV") of the Trust would be calculated and disseminated by the Sponsor, every 15 seconds during BZX's regular trading session, based on the most recent Gemini Auction Price.31 BZX represents that it has entered into a comprehensive surveillance-sharing agreement with the Gemini Exchange. Further details regarding the proposal and the Trust can be found in Amendments No. 1 and 2 to the proposal, supra note 1, and in the registration statement for the Trust.32

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the effect that Commission approval of the BZX proposal could have on bitcoin and the bitcoin markets.\textsuperscript{43} BZX’s primary argument is that the standard set forth in the March Disapproval Order—the need for a surveillance sharing agreement between the ETP listing exchange and significant, regulated markets related to the underlying asset\textsuperscript{44—is not the only way that a listing exchange can satisfy Section 6(b)(5)’s requirement that its rules be designed to prevent fraudulent and manipulative acts and practices with respect to listing an ETP.\textsuperscript{45} BZX argues that, in the case of a bitcoin commodity-trust ETP, traditional measures to detect and deter manipulation are sufficient.\textsuperscript{46} BZX and certain commenters further argue that the March Disapproval Order misconstrued Section 6(b)(5) to mean that a bitcoin ETP can be listed and traded only if bitcoin “cannot be manipulated.”\textsuperscript{47} They argue that such a standard is inconsistent with the “not readily susceptible to manipulation” standard applied to other commodities that underlie ETPs.\textsuperscript{48}

These arguments do not accurately reflect the nature of the Commission’s inquiry and past practice. The Commission agrees that, if BZX had demonstrated that bitcoin and bitcoin markets are inherently resistant to fraud and manipulation, comprehensive surveillance-sharing agreements with significant, regulated markets would not be required, as the function of such agreements is to detect and deter fraud and manipulation. But because the underlying commodities market for this proposed commodity-trust ETP is not demonstrably resistant to manipulation, BZX, as the ETP listing exchange, must enter into surveillance-sharing agreements with, or hold Intermarket Surveillance Group membership in common with, at least one significant, regulated market relating to bitcoin. Moreover, the Commission is not applying a “cannot be manipulated” standard to this proposal. Instead, the Commission is examining whether the proposed requirements of the Exchange Act and, pursuant to its Rules of Practice,\textsuperscript{49} is placing the burden on BZX to demonstrate the validity of its contention that the “novel systems intrinsic to this new market provide unique additional protections that are unavailable in traditional commodity markets,”\textsuperscript{50} and to establish that the requirements of the Exchange Act have been met.

Finding that BZX has not demonstrated that bitcoin and bitcoin markets are inherently resistant to manipulation, the Commission subjects the proposal to the analysis it has historically used to analyze commodity-trust ETPs, focusing particularly on whether there are comprehensive surveillance-sharing agreements with significant, regulated markets. Because adequate surveillance-sharing agreements are not in place—and any current surveillance-sharing agreements are with bitcoin-related markets that are either not significant, not regulated, or both—the Commission concludes that the proposal is inconsistent with Exchange Act Section 6(b)(5).

Accordingly, the Commission will examine whether the proposed rule change is consistent with Section 6(b)(5) by first addressing the arguments by BZX and certain commenters that bitcoin and bitcoin markets are inherently resistant to manipulation. The Commission will then address BZX’s argument that what it describes as “traditional means” of identifying and deterring fraud and manipulation would be sufficient to comply with Exchange Act Section 6(b)(5), which requires that BZX’s rules be designed to “prevent fraudulent and manipulative acts and practices” and “to protect investors and the public interest.”\textsuperscript{51} Finding these arguments unpersuasive, the Commission concludes that the proposal is inconsistent with previously approved commodity-trust ETPs, which have universally relied on surveillance-sharing agreements with significant, regulated markets relating to the underlying commodity in order to prevent fraud and manipulation and to protect investors and the public interest. Finally, the Commission addresses and rejects additional factors that BZX contends support approval.\textsuperscript{52}

B. The Susceptibility of Bitcoin and Bitcoin Markets to Manipulation

BZX asserts that intrinsic properties of bitcoin and bitcoin markets, including the Gemini Exchange, provide resistance to manipulation. But BZX has failed to carry its burden to demonstrate that its assertion is correct.

1. The Structure of the Spot Market for Bitcoin

(a) Summary of Comments Received

BZX argues that intrinsic properties of bitcoin and bitcoin markets make manipulation “difficult and prohibitively costly.”\textsuperscript{53} BZX argues that “novel systems intrinsic to this new market provide unique additional protections that are unavailable in traditional commodity markets.”\textsuperscript{54} BZX asserts that the increasing strength and resilience of the global bitcoin marketplace serve to reduce the likelihood of price manipulation and that arbitrage opportunities across globally diverse marketplaces allow market participants to ensure approximately equivalent pricing worldwide. But BZX concedes that less liquid markets, such as the market for bitcoin, may be more susceptible to manipulation.\textsuperscript{55}

BZX asserts that a number of new bitcoin market participants have emerged, changing the once concentrated and non-regulated landscape of the global bitcoin exchange marketplace, and that the emergence of these new market participants, who are chiefly arbitrageurs, causes global bitcoin exchange prices to converge.\textsuperscript{56} BZX adds that arbitrageurs must have funds distributed across multiple bitcoin exchanges to take advantage of temporary price dislocations, and that this distribution of funds discourages concentration of funds on any one particular bitcoin exchange and mitigates the potential for manipulation on a bitcoin exchange because doing so would require overcoming the liquidity supply of arbitrageurs that are actively eliminating any cross-market pricing differences.\textsuperscript{57}

BZX also asserts that the bitcoin spot market generally is less susceptible to manipulation than the equity, fixed income, and commodity futures markets, in part, because: (a) A substantial over-the-counter (“OTC”) market provides liquidity and shock absorbing capacity; (b) the “24/7/365” trading of bitcoin provides constant arbitrage opportunities across all trading venues and means that there is no single market-close for investors to attempt to manipulate; and (c) it is unlikely that any one actor could obtain a dominant
The commenter argues, the harder it would be for a dominant actor to obtain a dominant market share of the dominant exchange’s trading volume.64

Another analysis—the Lewis Letter65—argues that, as a general matter, the underlying market for bitcoin is inherently resistant to manipulation.66 The Lewis Letter posits that the underlying bitcoin market is not susceptible to manipulation because: (a) There is no inside information related to bitcoin, such as earnings announcements; (b) the asset is not subject to the dilution of false or misleading information; (c) each bitcoin market is an independent entity, so that a demand for liquidity does not necessarily propagate across other exchanges; (d) a substantial OTC market provides additional liquidity and absorption of shocks; (e) there is no market-close pricing event to manipulate; (f) the market is not subject to “spoofing” or other high-frequency-trading tactics; (g) order books on exchanges worldwide are publicly visible and available through APIs (application program interfaces); and (h) it is unlikely that any one person could obtain a dominant market share because of the existence of in-kind creations and redemptions, arbitrage across bitcoin markets, and the enhanced transparency that a bitcoin ETF would bring to bitcoin markets.67 The Lewis Letter acknowledges the risk that a single investor or a small group acting in collusion could own a dominant share of the available bitcoin, but argues that the structure of the spot bitcoin market and the arbitrage mechanism reduce that risk.68

One commenter observes that the bitcoin/Chinese Yuan (BTC/CNY) quote is apt to trade at a significant premium to the bitcoin/U.S. dollar (BTC/USD) quote and points out that large arbitrage opportunities would not exist for long in efficient markets, but they do persist in bitcoin markets.69 Another commenter claims that, because trade is now sparse on regulated U.S. exchanges, including Gemini, arbitrage will not occur efficiently or proportionally to mitigate manipulation from the dominant unregulated bitcoin exchanges.70

One commenter states that for bitcoin, by trade volume, is very shallow. This commenter states that the majority of bitcoin is hoarded by a few owners or is out of circulation. The commenter also states that ownership concentration is high, with 50 percent of bitcoin in the hands of fewer than 1,000 people, and that this high ownership concentration creates greater market liquidity risk, as large blocks of bitcoin are difficult to sell in a timely and market efficient manner. This commenter claims that daily trade volume is only a small fraction of total bitcoin mined.72

One commenter asserts that the number of spot bitcoin exchanges worldwide far exceeds the number of venues for many commodity futures, some of which are underlying assets of existing commodity-trust ETPs. The commenter argues that, therefore, widespread global bitcoin liquidity makes bitcoin less susceptible to manipulation via trading activity conducted on a single exchange, as compared to less-liquid commodity futures that trade on a few exchanges.73

One commenter states that bitcoin trades on a number of exchanges around the world and that most of these exchanges can be considered isolated liquidity pools, which are more vulnerable to manipulation or security breach than the broader market.74

57 See BZX Letter II, supra note 13, at 12; see also Petition for Review, supra note 4, at 11.
58 See Petition for Review, supra note 4, at 16.
59 See supra note 36.
60 See Overdahl Letter, supra note 36, at 1–2.
61 Id.
62 The Commodity Exchange Act defines “spoofing” as bidding or offering for sale with the intent to cancel the bid or offer before execution. See 7 U.S.C. 6c(a)(5)(C).
63 See Overdahl Letter, supra note 36, at 2, 9; see also Petition for Review, supra note 4, at 14.
64 See Overdahl Letter, supra note 36, at 9.
66 See Lewis Letter I, supra note 65, at 5–8.
67 See Lewis Letter I, supra note 65, at 5–9; Lewis Letter II, supra note 65, at 2.
68 See Lewis Letter I, supra note 65, at 6–7.
69 See ARK Letter, supra note 35, at 5.
70 See Maher Letter, supra note 35.
71 See SIG Letter, supra note 36, at 6.
72 See Williams Letter, supra note 35, at 1–2.
73 See SIG Letter, supra note 36, at 4–5.
74 See ARK Letter, supra note 35, at 8.
Finally, both BZX and the Overdahl Letter argue that the Commodity Futures Trading Commission’s (“CFTC”) granting of registration to bitcoin swap-execution facilities (“SEFs”) means that the CFTC has addressed the issue of manipulation and determined that the underlying spot markets for bitcoin are not susceptible to manipulation. 75

(b) Discussion

BZX has not demonstrated that the structure of the spot market for bitcoin is uniquely resistant to manipulation. 76

(i) Bitcoin Market Structure & Arbitrage

While two commenters questioned the effectiveness of arbitrage across bitcoin markets, 77 BZX, the Overdahl Letter, and the Lewis Letter argue that the structure of the bitcoin spot market and the availability of arbitrage will help keep worldwide bitcoin prices aligned, hindering manipulation. 78 The Overdahl Letter and Lewis Letter claim that economic analysis demonstrates that bitcoin markets are resistant to manipulation. But, as discussed below, the arguments submitted in support of this claim are incomplete and inconsistent, and are unsupported or contradicted by data.

BZX, the Overdahl Letter, and the Lewis Letter offer broad assertions that the increasing strength and resilience of the non-stop global bitcoin market place, the emergence of new market participants, and the transparency of the market have facilitated arbitrage that has caused global bitcoin exchange prices to converge. 79 But BZX, the Overdahl Letter, and the Lewis Letter offer no data or analysis regarding the actual effectiveness of arbitrage in the bitcoin spot market, either in terms of how closely prices are aligned across different bitcoin trading venues or how quickly price disparities are arbitrated away. 80 Similarly, the commenter who asserts that regulatory actions by the People’s Bank of China were designed to discourage price manipulation, and have had profound and beneficial effects on bitcoin spot markets worldwide, has provided no empirical evidence to substantiate this claim. 81 In addition, the Commission notes that one commenter asserts that large arbitrage opportunities persist in bitcoin markets. 82

While BZX cites a comment letter relating to a different proposed rule change for the proposition that price discrepancies across four selected USD-denominated bitcoin markets are generally arbitrated away in under a minute, 83 even if that limited factual assertion is true, BZX has not explained why it is relevant to the Commission’s consideration of the proposal, given that (a) the worldwide spot market for bitcoin is not limited to trading against the USD, (b) market participants could engage in creation or redemption transactions with the Trust using bitcoins sourced from any trading venue or from OTC transactions, and (c) the Gemini Exchange is not among the four bitcoin trading venues observed by the commenter. Thus, this argument does not support BZX’s broad assertion about the effectiveness of arbitrage across the worldwide bitcoin market.

BZX also argues that manipulation in the bitcoin market is unlikely because would-be manipulators would have to overcome the liquidity supplied by arbitrageurs, who must have funds distributed across multiple bitcoin markets to engage in arbitrage, 84 and the Overdahl Letter asserts that the manipulation of bitcoin is prohibitively expensive because manipulating the price of bitcoin on any given venue would require manipulation of the entire global bitcoin market to be effective. 85 These theoretical arguments depend on effective arbitrage existing across bitcoin markets, but, as noted above, the Commission concludes that BZX has not provided a factual basis in the record to conclude that arbitrage across bitcoin exchanges is effective. Moreover, these arguments are inconsistent: If, in fact, market participants must disperse their capital across multiple trading venues to engage in effective arbitrage, then a market participant may be able to manipulate trading on a single trading venue by concentrating its capital and trading activity there. The Overdahl Letter’s argument that manipulation of one bitcoin trading venue would require overcoming liquidity on all bitcoin

75 See BZX Letter II, supra note 13, at 17; Overdahl Letter, supra note 36, at 12. The Overdahl Letter also notes that the CFTC-regulated CME Group recently created a standardized bitcoin reference rate and a bitcoin spot price index.

76 Overdahl Letter, supra note 36, at 12.

77 See supra notes 52–68 and accompanying text.

78 See supra notes 52–68 and accompanying text.

79 While the Overdahl Letter compares the Gemini Exchange bitcoin price to the median price and the volume-weighted average price of a group of USD-denominated bitcoin markets, such an analysis does not demonstrate whether the range of prices across those other markets is broad or narrow.

80 See supra note 71 and accompanying text.

81 See supra note 69 and accompanying text.


83 See supra note 56 and accompanying text.

84 See supra notes 60–61 and accompanying text.
the Trust’s NAV would differ from the Gemini Auction price only if the auction price, which is publicly disseminated itself, is determined not to reflect a fair price for bitcoin. Both the Overdahl Letter and the Lewis Letter contend that bitcoin markets are not subject to “spoofing,” a manipulative quoting strategy.93 Neither letter, however, presents any data or analysis to support its claim, and there is no basis in the record to conclude whether bitcoin spot markets are subject to spoofing or other deceptive quoting practices. As a general matter, the manipulation of asset prices can occur simply through trading activity that creates a false impression of supply or demand, whether in the context of a closing auction or in the course of continuous trading, and does not require formal linkages among markets (such as consolidated quotations or routing requirements) or the complex quoting behavior associated with high-frequency trading.92 The Commission also notes that, in contrast to the theoretical arguments in the Overdahl Letter and the Lewis Letter, TeraExchange (a market for swaps on bitcoin) arranged for participants to make manipulative “wash” transactions.93

Finally, BZX’s, the Lewis Letter’s, and the Overdahl Letter’s discussions of the possible sources of manipulation are incomplete and do not form a basis to find that bitcoin is uniquely resistant to manipulation—or to find, by implication, that there is no need for a surveillance framework between an exchange listing shares of a bitcoin-based ETF and significant markets trading bitcoin or bitcoin derivatives. For example, assuming there is no inside information related to the earnings or revenue of bitcoin, there may be material nonpublic information related to: The actions of regulators with respect to bitcoin; order flow, such as plans of market participants to significantly increase or decrease their holdings in bitcoin; new sources of demand, such as new ETPs that would hold bitcoin; or the decision of a bitcoin-based ETF, a bitcoin trading venue, or a bitcoin wallet service provider with respect to how it would respond to a “fork” in the blockchain, which would create two different, non-interchangeable types of bitcoin. Moreover, bitcoin is susceptible to the dissemination of false or misleading information regarding the types of material, nonpublic information just discussed. The Commission also notes a recent academic paper finding empirical evidence of trading in bitcoin markets based on material nonpublic information.95

Two additional risks that the Trust’s Registration Statement acknowledges—(1) hacking and (2) malicious control of the Bitcoin Network—undermine BZX’s argument that bitcoin and bitcoin markets are inherently resistant to fraud and manipulation. The Trust’s Registration Statement recognizes that bitcoin trading venues can be and have been attacked by hackers, which can affect liquidity and result in volatile prices.96 Profit-motivated hackers can launch such attacks to manipulate bitcoin and achieve their “intended effect of artificially raising or lowering prices.”97

For example, as described in the Trust’s Registration Statement, supra note 22, in the event the Bitcoin Network undergoes a “hard fork” into two blockchains, the Custodian and the Sponsor will determine which of the resulting blockchains to use as the basis for the assets of the Trust and, under certain circumstances, will have discretion to determine which blockchain is “most likely to be supported by a majority of users or miners.” Id. at 113. See also Lee Letter, supra note 35; Johnson Letter, supra note 35; Schulte Letter, supra note 35; Anonymous Letter V, supra note 35; Anonymous Letter VI, supra note 35. The decision of the Custodian and Sponsor to support one resulting blockchain over another could have a material effect on the relative value of the bitcoins in each of the blockchains, undermining BZX’s argument that bitcoin and “Bitcoin Cash” occurred on August 1, 2017, and a fork between bitcoin and “Bitcoin Gold” occurred on October 24, 2017. See Wenjun Feng, Yiming Wang & Zhengjun Zhang, Informed Trading in the Bitcoin Market, Fin. Res. Letters, Dec. 2, 2017, available at https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1546153017303954.


Registration Statement, supra note 22, at 17, 56. The Registration Statement notes that obtaining control in excess of 50% of the processing power on the Bitcoin network is sufficient, and that “there are some academics and market participants who believe the applicable threshold required to exert authority over the Bitcoin Network could be less than fifty (50) percent, which would increase the chances of a malicious actor exerting authority over the Bitcoin Network.” Id. at 17.


Registration Statement, supra note 22, at 23.
bitcoin trading venues. One recent academic paper examined whether the growth of the circulating supply of Tether (a cryptocurrency that claims to be backed by the U.S. dollar) through new issuances “is primarily driven by investor demand, or is supplied to investors as a scheme to profit from pushing cryptocurrency prices up.” 101 Through statistical analysis of the blockchains of bitcoin and Tether, the authors conclude that entities associated with a specific cryptocurrency trading venue—which the authors link to Tether’s founders—“use Tether to purchase bitcoin when prices are falling”; that “[s]uch price supporting activities are successful, as Bitcoin prices rise after the period of intervention,” with “substantial aggregate price effects” across bitcoin trading platforms; and that this activity “occurs more aggressively right below salient round-number price thresholds where the price support might be most effective.” 102 The paper finds that the periods of strongest Tether flows are “associated with 50% of Bitcoin compounded return” from March 1, 2017, to March 31, 2018. 103 Overall, the authors conclude that their findings “provide substantial support for the view that price manipulation may be behind substantial distortive effects in cryptocurrencies” and “suggest that external capital market surveillance and monitoring may be necessary to obtain a market that is truly free.” 104 The Commission also notes another recent academic paper, which concludes that there was fraudulent and manipulative activity on a single bitcoin trading venue. 105

These studies supplement the Commission’s conclusion that there is an insufficient basis in the record before it to decide that the bitcoin spot markets are inherently resistant to manipulation. 106 Even without these studies, however, the Commission would still find that BZX has not demonstrated that the structure of the spot market for bitcoin is uniquely resistant to manipulation. Moreover, even if the record supported the proposition that some features of bitcoin and bitcoin markets mitigate some types of manipulation to some degree, the Commission concludes that such mitigation is insufficient to justify dispensing with the detection and deterrence of fraud and manipulation provided by surveillance-sharing agreements with significant, regulated markets. 107 (ii) Market Domination

While BZX argues that it is unlikely that any one actor could obtain a

dominant market share, 108 BZX does not address the risk of pre-existing dominant positions, a risk that the Lewis Letter acknowledges. 109 Similarly, while the Overdahl Letter maintains that the existence of a dominant bitcoin exchange would not imply the existence of a dominant ownership position, and that the existence of a market with a large share of trading volume would make it more difficult for a market participant to obtain a dominant ownership position, 110 the Overdahl Letter does not address the risk of pre-existing dominant positions in bitcoin. The Lewis Letter, however, specifically acknowledges this risk, noting: “One of the risks associated with bitcoin is the possibility that a single investor or a small group acting in collusion could own a dominant share of the available bitcoin.” 111 The Lewis Letter goes on to explain that “[i]t is possible, and in fact, reasonably likely that a small group of early bitcoin adopters hold a significant proportion of the bitcoin that has thus far been created.” 112 Additionally, another commenter contends that the majority of bitcoin is held by a few owners, estimating that 50% of bitcoins are held by fewer than 1,000 people. 113

The Lewis Letter argues that the nature of the spot bitcoin market and the arbitrage mechanism should reduce the risk of manipulation through ownership of a dominant market share, 114 but this argument addresses whether market participants might acquire a dominant share of bitcoin ownership by trading in bitcoin markets.
and does not address the potential market effect of large bitcoin positions held by early adopters. Multiple academic studies have found the existence of concentrated holdings in an asset presents a meaningful risk of manipulation.\(^\text{115}\) Whether a dominant position came from being an early adopter of bitcoin or from trading activity would not alter the Commission’s view that a person or group with a dominant position may be capable of engaging in manipulative activity. The Commission thus cannot, on the record before it, conclude that bitcoin markets are uniquely resistant to manipulation.

(iii) Prior Regulatory Actions Regarding Bitcoin

Although commenters suggest that the CFTC has conclusively determined that bitcoin markets are not susceptible to manipulation because it has permitted the registration of bitcoin swap execution facilities as consistent with the Commodity Exchange Act (“CEA”),\(^\text{116}\) the CFTC has made no such sweeping finding as to bitcoin or bitcoin spot markets either in permitting the registration of those swap execution facilities or in more recently permitting the self-certification by Chicago Mercantile Exchange Inc. ("CME") and Cboe Futures Exchange, LLC ("CFE") of bitcoin futures contracts. The Commission notes that CFTC Chairman Giancarlo has described “heightened review” of the CME and CFE self-certifications as addressing the narrower question of whether the particular bitcoin futures products and cash-settlement processes—under the specific terms proposed by those two futures exchanges—were “readily susceptible to manipulation.”\(^\text{117}\) And the CFTC stated that the self-certification process for bitcoin futures contracts “does NOT provide for . . . value judgments about the underlying spot market,” and U.S. law “does not provide for direct, comprehensive Federal oversight of underlying Bitcoin or virtual currency spot markets.”\(^\text{118}\) Moreover, the CFTC’s statutory authority to review new derivative products differs substantially from the Commission’s authority, under Section 19(b) of the Exchange Act,\(^\text{119}\) with respect to the review of proposed rule changes by SROs. While there are “limited grounds” for the CFTC to take affirmative action to stay new product self-certifications,\(^\text{120}\) the Commission must, to approve a proposed rule change, make an affirmative finding that the proposed rule change is consistent with the Exchange Act, with the burden of demonstrating consistency with the Exchange Act resting with the SRO proposing the rule change.\(^\text{121}\) The Commission is also mindful that the primarily institutional markets that the CFTC supervises are materially different from the securities markets in which many retail investors participate directly. The CFTC acknowledges that “[m]ost participants in the futures markets are commercial or institutional commodities producers or consumers” and “[t]radings futures and options is a volatile, complex and risky venture that is rarely suitable for individual investors or ‘retail customers.’”\(^\text{122}\)

Accordingly, the Commission cannot conclude that actions taken to date by the CFTC determine whether the proposed bitcoin ETP is consistent with the applicable requirements of the Exchange Act, and the Commission must reach its own decision, under its own statutory mandate, to determine whether the proposal is designed to “protect investors and the public interest.”\(^\text{123}\)

2. Manipulation of the Gemini Exchange and the Gemini Auction

(a) Summary of Comments Received

BZX acknowledges in its comment letter that less-liquid markets, such as the market for bitcoin, may be more easily manipulated, but claims that these concerns are mitigated with respect to the Shares and the trading on the Gemini Exchange. BZX asserts that the Gemini Auction price is based on an extremely similar mechanism to the one leveraged for BZX’s own Opening and Closing Auctions and allows full and transparent participation from all Gemini Exchange participants in the price discovery process. BZX states that the auction process leverages mechanics that have proven over the years to be robust and effective on BZX and other national listing exchanges in both liquid and illiquid securities alike. BZX argues that, because the time of the Gemini Auction coincides with BZX’s Closing Auction, efficient real-time arbitrage between the closing price of the Trust and the Gemini Auction price will be prevalent and will lead to resilient and effective pricing of both the Trust and the underlying bitcoin asset, leading to convergence between the Trust’s closing price and its NAV.\(^\text{124}\) BZX asserts that the Gemini Auction price typically deviates very little from the prevailing price on other bitcoin exchanges, and BZX presents statistics purporting to show that this price is consistent with the prices of other U.S.-based exchanges.\(^\text{125}\)

BZX asserts that the Gemini Auction price is uniquely resistant to manipulation and that it more accurately reflects the bitcoin price than any other individual event or cross-market snapshot, because the largest bitcoin transactions each day usually occur via the Gemini Auction. BZX also claims that volumes transacted in the Gemini Auction are generally more than 50% larger than the second-largest trade in the world, drawing an average daily volume of 1,200 bitcoins compared to approximately 800 bitcoins.\(^\text{126}\)

In addition, BZX asserts that the Gemini Auction occurs at a scheduled time each day to maximize participation and price formation, while other liquidity events are often unpredictable and irregular.\(^\text{127}\) Another commenter claims that the Gemini Auction also concentrates liquidity and trading volume at a single moment each day.\(^\text{128}\)

BZX further asserts that, from its launch through May 12, 2017, the Gemini Auction price on business days has deviated from the Gemini midpoint price (the midrange of the highest bid


\(^{116}\) See supra note 75.

\(^{117}\) See Written Testimony of J. Christopher Giancarlo, Chairman, Commodity Futures Trading Commission, Before the Senate Banking Committee at text accompanying n.17 (Feb. 6, 2018) ("Giancarlo Testimony"), available at https://cfic.gov/PressRoom/SpeechesTestimony/opgiancarlo37. See also infra notes 285–288 (discussing role of CFTC with respect to underlying bitcoin spot markets).


\(^{120}\) See CFTC Backgrounder, supra note 118, at 2.

\(^{121}\) See supra notes 8, 10–12 and accompanying text. Compare 7 U.S.C. 7a-2(c) and 17 CFR 40.6 with 15 U.S.C. 78s(b) and 17 CFR 240.19b-4.

\(^{122}\) Futures Market Basics, CFTC, available at http://www.cftc.gov/ConsumerProtection/EducationCenter/FuturesMarketBasics/index.htm. Furthermore, the record does not contain evidence about whether CME or CFE can, in practice, actually obtain trading information from bitcoin exchanges, and thus whether the CFTC can obtain such information from CME or CFE.


\(^{124}\) See BZX Letter I, supra note 35, at 8; BZX Letter II, supra note 13, 10–11. See also SIG Letter, supra note 36, at 2–6; C&C Letter, supra note 36, at 1.

\(^{125}\) See BZX Letter I, supra note 35, at 8–9.

\(^{126}\) See BZX Letter II, supra note 13, at 19–20.

\(^{127}\) See id. at 20.

\(^{128}\) See Overdahl Letter, supra note 36, at 11.
and lowest offer prices) by 0.22% on average and 0.71% at most, that it has deviated from the median price of all U.S.-based bitcoin exchanges by 0.52% on average, and that it has deviated from the median price of all global USD-denominated bitcoin exchanges by 0.70% on average.\textsuperscript{129} BZX also claims that the Gemini Exchange is regularly near the top of bitcoin exchanges in terms of market-quality metrics for overall trading.\textsuperscript{130}

The Overdahl Letter asserts that the Gemini Auction price is reliable in that it generally reflects bitcoin traded at other U.S.-based bitcoin exchanges and bitcoin traded at USD-based exchanges globally and that, when noticeable discrepancies appear, arbitrage mechanisms quickly force prices back into alignment.\textsuperscript{131} The Overdahl Letter provides some update to the statistics provided by BZX and states that, from September 21, 2016 (the launch of the Gemini Auction), to March 1, 2017, the average daily deviation of the Gemini Auction price from the median 4:00 p.m. price of all U.S.-based bitcoin exchanges was 0.0058 percent and the average absolute deviation (that is, the average absolute value of deviations) was 0.1804 percent. The Overdahl Letter also states that, during the same period, the average daily deviation of the Gemini Auction price from the median 4:00 p.m. price of all global USD-denominated bitcoin exchanges was 0.0489 percent with an average absolute deviation of 0.2396 percent.\textsuperscript{132}

The Overdahl Letter also contends that the surveillance agreement between the Gemini Exchange and BZX allows for containing or deterring manipulation of the Gemini Auction price and that BZX’s rules are reasonably designed to prevent fraudulent and manipulative acts and practices with respect to determining the NAV of the Trust Shares.\textsuperscript{133} The Overdahl Letter further claims that the Gemini Auction is designed to not be readily susceptible to manipulation because it includes pre-trading transparency, which allows for full and transparent participation by all participants, uses a mechanism similar to that used by other exchanges in setting opening and closing prices, and concentrates liquidity and trading volume in a single moment each day.\textsuperscript{134} Regarding the calculation of NAV, the Overdahl Letter also argues that the Trust’s valuation procedures greatly reduce the risk that a malicious actor could influence the NAV of the Trust by manipulating the Gemini Auction, because alternative means can be used to value the Trust’s bitcoin if the Trust sponsor determines that the Gemini Auction price does not reflect the fair value of bitcoin.\textsuperscript{135}

Several commenters claim that the Gemini Exchange has low trading volumes,\textsuperscript{136} and one commenter claims that, of all the exchanges, Gemini has the worst pricing.\textsuperscript{137} Another commenter asserts that the Gemini Exchange has relatively low liquidity and trade volume and that there is a significant risk that the nominal ETP share price will be manipulated by relatively small trades that manipulate the bitcoin price at that exchange.\textsuperscript{138}

This commenter states that, while U.S.-based bitcoin exchanges are subjected to stricter regulations and auditing for the holding of client accounts, the trading itself seems to occur in a regulatory vacuum and seems impossible to audit effectively.\textsuperscript{139} This commenter expresses concerns regarding the Gemini Exchange Spot Price, noting that the nominal price of the Shares under the proposal is supposed to be tied to the market price of bitcoins at the Gemini Exchange, which is closely tied to the ETP proponents.\textsuperscript{140}

One commenter claims that most daily trading volume is conducted on poorly capitalized, unregulated exchanges located outside the United States and that these non-U.S. exchanges and their practices significantly influence the price discovery process.\textsuperscript{141} Another commenter states that the biggest and most influential bitcoin exchange is located outside U.S. jurisdiction.\textsuperscript{142} One commenter states that, since 2013, the price of bitcoin has been defined mostly by the major Chinese exchanges, whose volumes dwarf those of exchanges outside China, and that the price of bitcoin is defined entirely by speculation, without any ties to fundamentals.\textsuperscript{143} Another commenter observes that Chinese markets drive much of the volume in the bitcoin markets.\textsuperscript{144}

One commenter states that it makes sense to value the proposed ETP based on the Gemini Auction because doing so would guarantee sufficient liquidity and because other bitcoin trading venues are not subject to the same level of oversight as the Gemini Exchange.\textsuperscript{145} Another commenter asserts that the Gemini Auction is not a robust mechanism for price discovery because Gemini’s fee structure would make self-trading or collusive wash trades between accounts profitable, which would artificially inflate the volume of the Gemini Auction.\textsuperscript{146}

One commenter states that the Gemini Auction could be an improvement over other bitcoin pricing mechanisms, but asserts that the Gemini Auction has not improved volume.\textsuperscript{147} The commenter observes that the Gemini Auction data show that traders in the auction are taking advantage of the discounted auction price. The commenter states that the daily two-sided Gemini Auction process was designed to maximize price discovery and reduce price volatility that could be the result of momentum pricing, but asks what measures have been put in place to address traders who take advantage of the discounted auction price. The commenter also states that, while other financial products sometimes have auctions to determine price, an auction on a stock exchange does not require money to be deposited in advance with the exchange to be in the auction. The commenter states that, by contrast, the Gemini Exchange requires dollars or bitcoin to be deposited before participation. The commenter believes that this is a problem because the Gemini Auction is limited and has failed on at least two occasions.\textsuperscript{148}

Other commenters believe that the Gemini Exchange conducts sufficient volume to support the Winklevoss Bitcoin Trust. One commenter states that trading volume on the Gemini Exchange is sufficient and that...
manipulation of these Shares, while possible, would equally be possible for other exchange-traded funds.149 Another commenter asserts that trading volume in the recent Gemini bitcoin daily auctions seemed “to be of reasonable size.”150

One commenter claims that there are more robust ways to value the Trust’s holdings than using the spot price of a single exchange, such as the Gemini Exchange.151 The commenter also states that the Gemini Exchange typically processes less than 10% of the total volume in the bitcoin/USD pair and states that an index of the most reliable exchanges should be constructed to value the Trust’s holdings. The commenter questions whether using only the Gemini Exchange’s spot price could serve to incentivize Authorized Participants and other market participants to direct traffic and flow to Gemini, at the expense of best execution.152

Another commenter takes a different view on the merits of single- versus multiple-price sources. This commenter observes that bitcoin spot prices diverge across exchanges due to various factors and that some exchanges may suffer from lack of oversight and a lack of transparency or fairness. The commenter claims that these facts strengthen the case for an investment product that does not rely on the spot price of less-credible exchanges to value its holdings and instead relies on the spot price on the Gemini Exchange, which is subject to substantive regulation of its exchange activity and custody of assets by the NYDFS. This commenter also states that, while leveraged trading on other exchanges has historically sparked excessive price volatility and instability, Gemini does not offer such products and would be able to serve as a trusted, regulated spot exchange for institutional market participants driving the arbitrage mechanism that ensures efficient pricing between the spot price and the Shares. The commenter claims that the Gemini Exchange has the potential for more-robust price discovery as liquidity is concentrated on that exchange.153

One commenter states that there is an inherent trade-off to using one exchange versus an average of several exchanges, some of which may be less scrupulous. The commenter acknowledges that manipulation is a legitimate concern, but notes that it is not uncommon to see a very small number of physical trades determine the base price for a much larger paper market.154 Other commenters view the risk of manipulation as more significant. One commenter states that it would be surprising if manipulative practices that would be illegal in other financial markets did not occur on certain bitcoin exchanges that experience lack of regulations and oversight, since these practices would be easy to implement, impossible to detect, perfectly legal under the rules applicable to those bitcoin exchanges, and extremely lucrative.155 This commenter also states that the Gemini Auction closing volumes have been low and have shown a slight decreasing trend since the inception of the Gemini Auction. The commenter states that, with low volumes, it seems possible to manipulate the NAV by entering suitable bids or asks in the Gemini Auction.156 Another commenter agrees that bitcoin traders can manipulate trading on the Gemini Exchange because of its low trading volumes and notes that the Trust’s documentation states that momentum pricing of bitcoin has resulted, and may continue to result, in speculation regarding future appreciation in the value of bitcoin, making the price of bitcoin more volatile.157 The commenter states that the value of bitcoin may therefore be more likely to fluctuate due to changing investor confidence in future appreciation in the Gemini Auction price, which could adversely affect an investment in the Shares.158 According to another commenter, in this unregulated environment, price manipulation and front-running of large buy or sell orders can happen and well-connected customers can gain preferential treatment in order execution.159

(b) Discussion

For the reasons discussed below, the Commission concludes that BZX has not demonstrated that the Gemini Exchange and the Gemini Auction are resistant to manipulation. Commenters disagree about whether the Gemini Exchange and the Gemini Auction are susceptible to manipulation. BZX promotes the Gemini Exchange as one of the top three bitcoin exchanges in the United States,160 and some commenters believe that the Gemini Exchange conducts sufficient volume to support the Winklevoss Bitcoin Trust.161 Other commenters, however, question these assertions, some noting that the majority of bitcoin trading, including trading denominated in USD, occurs on unregulated exchanges outside the United States,162 and one suggesting that the low liquidity and trading volume on the Gemini Exchange create a significant risk that the ETP share price could be manipulated by relatively small traders.163

While BZX claims in its May 2017 comment letter that the average volume of the Gemini Auction is 1,200 bitcoins,164 calculations based on public data from the Gemini Exchange website show that more recent Gemini Auction volume has been significantly lower. As of March 31, 2018, the average number of bitcoins traded in the Gemini Auction on a business day was just 178.07 bitcoins over the previous month, 122.20 bitcoins over the previous three months, and 138.46 bitcoins over the previous six months. Median volume figures for the same periods are even lower: 146.51 bitcoins, 85.09 bitcoins, and 90.42 bitcoins, respectively. Although the Gemini Exchange conducts the Gemini Auction on each calendar day, to better represent auction volume for days on which creations or redemptions might occur in the Shares, these calculations of average and median auction volume exclude auctions that occurred on weekends and days on which the U.S. equities markets were closed. Days on which no Gemini Auction price was reached were also excluded to avoid skewing data.

The volume of the Gemini Auction is of particular relevance to BZX’s proposal, and to the susceptibility of the ETP shares to manipulation, because the Gemini Auction price is used to determine the NAV of the Trust, which is publicly disseminated and which is the price used for creation and redemption transactions. Taking into account the recent low auction volume calculated above, which is a small fraction of the 1,000 bitcoins in a creation or redemption basket,165 the Commission concludes that there is a substantial risk that either (1) any creation and redemption activity in the

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149 See Anonymous Letter I, supra note 35.
150 See Delehanty Letter, supra note 35.
151 See ARK Letter, supra note 35, at 7–8.
152 See id. at 8–9.
154 See Delehanty Letter, supra note 35.
155 See Stolfi Letter II, supra note 35.
156 See id.
157 See Anonymous Letter III, supra note 35.
158 See id.
159 See Williams Letter, supra note 35, at 2.
160 See supra note 130 and accompanying text.
161 See supra notes 149–150 and accompanying text.
162 See supra notes 141–144 and accompanying text.
163 See supra note 138 and accompanying text.
164 See BZX Letter II, supra note 13, at 20.
165 See Amendment No. 2, supra note 1, setting size of creation unit at 100,000 shares, with the value of a share at 0.01 bitcoin, making content of a creation unit 1,000 bitcoins).
The Trust’s Registration Statement acknowledges that the reliance on a single bitcoin exchange has risks to shareholders in the Trust: “Trading on a single Bitcoin Exchange may result in less favorable prices and decreased liquidity for the Trust and, therefore, could have an adverse effect on the Trust and Shareholders.”167 Moreover, although commenters have suggested that approval of the proposal would naturally lead to greater activity in the Gemini Auction,168 such speculation does not provide an adequate basis to decide that future Gemini Auction volume would be sufficient to prevent manipulation of the Gemini Auction from affecting the NAV of the Trust, and BZX has not explained how the favorable market quality metrics it attributes to the Gemini Exchange would be affected if trading interest at the Gemini Auction were dominated by creation and redemption activity.169 Therefore, again, the Commission cannot conclude that the pricing mechanism of the Trust would render the Shares uniquely resistant to manipulation.

C. The Availability of “Traditional Means” To Detect and Deter Fraud and Manipulation

BZX has not demonstrated, given the current absence of a surveillance-sharing agreement with a regulated bitcoin market of significant size, that the alternative surveillance procedures BZX purports to identify—including BZX’s assertion that it would be able to obtain certain information regarding trading in the Shares and in the underlying bitcoin or any bitcoin derivative—would be sufficient to satisfy the requirement of Exchange Act Section 6(b)(5) that an exchange’s rules be designed to prevent fraudulent and manipulative acts and practices.

1. Summary of Comments Received

BZX asserts that the March Disapproval Order failed to appreciate that the proposal provides “traditional means of identifying and deterring fraud and manipulation” that meet the criteria that the Commission has utilized in approving other commodity-trust ETPs.170 BZX states that a particular area of surveillance focus for the Commission in prior commodity-trust ETP approval orders was the implementation of exchange rules requiring market makers in the commodity-trust ETP shares to disclose their dealings in the underlying commodities. BZX contends that analogous requirements are included in this proposal, with BZX Rule 14.11(e)(4) mandating that market makers in the Shares disclose all of their commodity trading accounts, disclose all trading in bitcoin or bitcoin derivatives, and make available all related books and records.171 BZX also contends that, in the prior commodity-trust ETP approval orders, the Commission also reviewed the adequacy of the ETP listing exchange’s rules and procedures for surveillance of trading activity in the ETP shares. According to BZX, similar surveillance rules and procedures are in place at BZX regarding the proposed bitcoin ETP, as the listing exchange can obtain information regarding trading in Shares from Intermarket Surveillance Group members and affiliate members, as well as trading information available on the blockchain and information available through a surveillance-sharing agreement with the Gemini Exchange.172

The Overdahl Letter also contends that BZX’s rules are reasonably designed to prevent fraudulent and manipulative acts and practices with respect to determining the NAV of the Trust Shares.173 Specifically, according to the Overdahl Letter, the type of potential manipulation most relevant for determining the NAV of the Trust’s Shares would be a malicious actor attempting to use the Gemini Auction price to influence the NAV of the Trust. The Overdahl Letter also asserts that, in addition to BZX’s surveillance procedures and anti-manipulation rules, penalties for engaging in manipulative conduct serve as a deterrent against manipulation of the Gemini Auction price and the resulting Trust’s NAV. The Overdahl Letter states that, although a penalty is applied after a manipulation occurs or is attempted, penalties are nonetheless a useful tool for deterring, and therefore preventing, manipulation.174

Finally, one commenter claims that the March Disapproval Order reflects the Commission’s “unspoken but obvious concern” with bitcoin, and argues that this issue can be cured by having the bitcoin exchange sign a memorandum of understanding with the Commission to share information.175

166 See supra note 30.

167 Registration Statement, supra note 22, at 22.

168 See Maher Letter, supra note 35; Overdahl Letter, supra note 36, at 3; SIG Letter, supra note 36, at 8.

169 See supra note 130 and accompanying text.

170 See BZX Letter II, supra note 13, at 22, 26.

171 See id. at 23.

172 See id. The surveillance-sharing agreement between BZX and the Gemini Exchange is discussed in Section III.E.1, infra.


174 See id. at 11.

175 See Convergex Letter, supra note 36, at 2.
2. Discussion

The Commission concludes that BZX has not demonstrated—that the current absence of a surveillance-sharing agreement with a regulated bitcoin market of significant size—that the alternative surveillance procedures discussed above would, by themselves, be sufficient to satisfy the requirement of Exchange Act Section 6(b)(5) that an exchange’s rules be designed to prevent fraudulent and manipulative acts and practices.176

While BZX would, pursuant to its listing rules, be able to obtain certain information regarding trading in the Shares and in the underlying bitcoin or any bitcoin derivative through registered market makers,177 this trade information would be limited to the activities of members who were registered with BZX as market makers in the Shares and would not encompass all BZX market participants.178

Furthermore, neither BZX’s ability to surveil trading in the Shares nor its ability to share surveillance information with other securities exchanges trading the Shares would give BZX insight into the activity and identity of market participants trading in the underlying bitcoin in the OTC market or on other bitcoin trading venues.

Additionally, while BZX represents that it can obtain information about bitcoin trading made publicly available through the bitcoin blockchain,179 the blockchain identifies parties to a transaction only by a pseudonymous public-key address, and it does not distinguish bitcoin trading activity from other transfers of bitcoin (e.g., for remittances, purchases of goods or services, or other purposes). Therefore, the public blockchain ledger, even in combination with the other monitoring abilities BZX identifies, does not provide comprehensive customer trading or identity information, which is particularly important here because pseudonymous bitcoin account holding means, among other things, that the number of accounts or number of trades would not reveal whether a person or group has a dominant ownership position in bitcoin, or is using or attempting to use a dominant ownership position to manipulate bitcoin pricing.180

One commenter asserts that existing “penalties for engaging in manipulative conduct” can serve to deter manipulation of the Gemini Auction price and, therefore, the Trust’s NAV.181 However, the Commission concludes that, based on the facts and circumstances of this proposal, the ability of relevant authorities to potentially sanction manipulative activity after the fact—if it is discovered—is insufficient, by itself, to meet BZX’s obligation to have rules “designed to prevent fraudulent and manipulative acts and practices.” 182

Before penalties can be imposed for engaging in manipulative conduct, such conduct must be detected and investigated; as discussed below, that is the necessary function of comprehensive surveillance-sharing agreements.183 Moreover, as discussed below, a substantial majority of bitcoin trading occurs outside the United States,184 and even within the United States, there is no comprehensive federal oversight of bitcoin spot markets.185

Another commenter suggests that the Commission sign a Memorandum of Understanding (“MOU”) with the Gemini Exchange to address what the commenter claims is the Commission’s unspoken but obvious concern with bitcoin.186 While the Commission is a party to several MOUs, these are generally arrangements with other foreign or domestic regulators.187 MOUs are tools to assist the Commission in performing its regulatory functions, not a mechanism for the Commission to assume an SRO’s obligations under the Exchange Act.

The Commission concludes that BZX’s obligation to have rules designed to prevent fraudulent and manipulative acts and practices, and any bitcoin derivative through the Shares and in the underlying bitcoin or any bitcoin derivative, be sufficient to satisfy the requirement of Exchange Act Section 6(b)(5) that an exchange’s rules be designed to prevent fraudulent and manipulative acts and practices.176

1. Summary of Comments Received

BZX claims that the March Disapproval Order overstates the extent to which surveillance and regulation of the underlying market have been present in prior commodity-trust ETP approval orders, asserting that none of these orders “offers even a cursory analysis about whether the regulated markets for trading futures on the underlying commodity are ‘well-established’ or ‘significant.’ ”188 In particular, BZX argues that the Commission orders approving the ETFS Platinum Trust ETP (“Platinum Order”) and the ETFS Palladium Trust ETP (“Palladium Order”),189 along with their exchange filings, discuss neither whether the New York Mercantile Exchange (“NYMEX”) and the Tokyo Commodity Exchange (“TOCOM”) are well-established or significant, nor the relevance of NYMEX being the largest exchange in the world for trading palladium and platinum derivatives.190 BZX claims that—because the exchange filings regarding the platinum and palladium ETFs note that TOCOM is not a member of the Intermarket Surveillance Group and that the respective listing exchange did not have a comprehensive surveillance-sharing agreement with TOCOM—that approval orders did not require the existence of an information-sharing agreement with the underlying

D. The Use of Surveillance-Sharing Agreements To Detect and Deter Fraudulent and Manipulative Acts and Practices With Respect to Commodity-Trust ETPs

The Commission has historically recognized the importance of comprehensive surveillance-sharing agreements to detect and deter fraudulent and manipulative activity. Because BZX has not demonstrated that bitcoin and bitcoin markets are uniquely resistant to manipulation—or that alternative means of detecting and deterring fraud and manipulation are sufficient in the absence of a surveillance-sharing agreement with a significant, regulated market related to bitcoin—the absence of such an agreement compels the Commission to conclude that the proposed rule change must be disapproved.


177 See supra note 171 and accompanying text.


179 See Amendment No. 1, supra note 1, 81 FR at 76668.

180 See also Section III.B.1(b)(ii), supra (discussing market domination).

181 See supra note 174 and accompanying text.


183 See Section III.D, infra.

184 See infra notes 281–282 and accompanying text.

185 See infra notes 286–288 and accompanying text.

186 See supra note 175 and accompanying text.


188 See BZX Letter II, supra note 13, at 26–27.


190 See BZX Letter II, supra note 13, at 27.
exchange.\textsuperscript{191} BZX further asserts that the Platinum Order and Palladium Order discuss only whether the listing exchange (1) can obtain information from market makers relating to their trading in the applicable commodity or related derivatives; (2) has a rule preventing market makers from using material, nonpublic information regarding trading in the underlying commodity or its derivatives; and (3) can obtain trading information via the Intermarket Surveillance Group from other Intermarket Surveillance Group member exchanges.\textsuperscript{192} BZX further asserts that, while the potential avenues for manipulation noted in the March Disapproval Order are a risk, these potential avenues of manipulation of the bitcoin market also exist in the context of other commodity-trust ETPs.\textsuperscript{193} BZX asserts that, in the Commission order approving the listing and trading of shares of iShares Copper Trust (“Copper Order”),\textsuperscript{194} the Commission found that demand from new investors would broaden the investor base in copper and thereby reduce the risk of collusion among copper market participants. BZX also argues that the Commission “took comfort” in approving the iShares Copper Trust because trading of the shares would be subject to the oversight of the listing exchange and the Commission, and because the manipulation of physical copper would be subject to CFTC jurisdiction. BZX asserts that the Trust is nearly identically situated to the iShares Copper Trust.\textsuperscript{195} Similarly, the Lewis Letter asserts that many features of a similar bitcoin commodity-trust ETP proposal—features that purportedly ameliorate the risk of price manipulation through a dominant market share—are also factors that were used as a basis for the Commission’s approval of another copper commodity-trust ETP.\textsuperscript{196} BZX contends that previous ETP approvals demonstrate that the factors used to determine whether currency-derivative products are consistent with the Exchange Act should also apply to commodity-trust ETPs. BZX argues that the Commission order approving the listing and trading of the streetTRACKS Gold Shares (“Gold Order”)—the first commodity-trust ETP—was based on an assumption that the currency market and the spot gold market were largely unregulated, but found that certain factors mitigated the concerns arising from the unregulated underlying markets.\textsuperscript{197} BZX claims that, in determining whether a commodity-trust ETP is consistent with the Exchange Act, the Commission’s approval orders have included an analysis of previously approved derivative products for which the underlying reference assets (1) are traded OTC; (2) are largely unregulated; and (3) are traded on markets with which the ETP listing exchange could not enter into a surveillance sharing agreement.\textsuperscript{198} While BZX concedes that the Commission has not approved a commodity-trust ETP when there were no derivatives markets related to the underlying commodity, BZX points out that the Commission has approved a number of currency-trust ETPs and asserts that the Commission approved the listing and trading of the CurrencyShares Hong Kong Dollar Trust and the CurrencyShares Singapore Dollar Trust based largely on the same factors that the Commission has considered in approving commodity-trust ETPs, despite a statement in the approval order for the CurrencyShares Hong Kong Dollar Trust and the CurrencyShares Singapore Dollar Trust that futures or options are not traded on the Hong Kong Dollar or Singapore Dollar.\textsuperscript{200} Similarly, one commenter argues that there are several commodity-based and other ETPs where the underlying market is either unregulated or lightly regulated, such as foreign-exchange linked or related ETPs, or commodity-based ETPs that hold the underlying and not the derivative product.\textsuperscript{201}
of such an agreement are that the agreement provides for the sharing of information about market trading activity, clearing activity, and customer identity; that the parties to the agreement have reasonable ability to obtain access to and produce requested information; and that no existing rules, laws, or practices would impede one party to the agreement from obtaining this information from, or producing it to, the other party.

Since at least 1990, the Commission has explained that the ability of a national securities exchange to enter into surveillance-sharing agreements “furthers the protection of investors and the public interest because it will enable the exchange to conduct prompt investigations into possible trading violations and other regulatory improprieties.” The Commission has also taken the position that surveillance-sharing agreements are important in the context of exchange listing of derivative security products, such as equity options. In 1994, the Commission stated:

As a general matter, the Commission believes that the existence of a surveillance sharing agreement that effectively permits the sharing of information between an exchange proposing to list an equity option and the exchange trading the stock underlying the option is necessary to detect and deter market manipulation and other trading abuses. In particular, the Commission notes that surveillance sharing agreements provide an important deterrent to manipulation because they facilitate the availability of information needed to fully investigate a potential manipulation if it were to occur. These agreements are especially important in the context of derivative products based on foreign securities because they facilitate the collection of necessary regulatory, surveillance and other information from foreign jurisdictions.

With respect to ETPs, when approving in 1995 the listing and trading of one of the first commodity-linked ETPs—a commodity-linked exchange-traded note—on a national securities exchange, the Commission continued to emphasize the importance of surveillance-sharing agreements, noting that the listing exchange had entered into surveillance-sharing agreements with each of the futures markets on which pricing of the ETP would be based and stating that “[t]hese agreements should help to ensure the availability of information necessary to detect and deter potential manipulations and other trading abuses, thereby making [the commodity-linked notes] less readily susceptible to manipulation.”

trades and the exchange where the foreign security underlying the ADR primarily trades, will ensure the integrity of the market. The Commission further believes that the ability to obtain relevant surveillance information, including, among other things, the identity of the ultimate purchasers and sellers of securities, is an essential and necessary component of a comprehensive surveillance sharing agreement.”

The Commission has made similar statements about surveillance-sharing agreements, the listing exchange being able to obtain, upon request, surveillance information with respect to trades effected on the London Metal Exchange, including client identity information and (b) that, if a different market were utilized for purposes of calculating the value of a designated futures contract, the listing exchange had represented that it would ensure that it entered into a surveillance-sharing agreement with respect to the new relevant market. The Commission has made similar statements about surveillance-sharing agreements with respect to the listing and trading of stock-index, currency, and currency-index warrants. See, e.g., Exchange Act Release No. 36166 (Aug. 29, 1995), 60 FR 46660 (Sept. 7, 1995) [SR-PSE–94–28] (approving a proposal to adopt uniform listing and trading guidelines for stock-index, currency, and currency-index warrants). Specifically, the Commission noted that “a surveillance sharing agreement should provide the parties with the ability to obtain information necessary to detect and deter market manipulation and other trading abuses” and stated that the Commission “generally requires that a surveillance sharing agreement require that the parties to such an agreement provide each other, upon request, information about market trading activity, clearing activity, and the identity of the ultimate purchasers for securities.” Id. at

Continued
In 1998, in adopting Exchange Act Rule 19b–4(e)\(^{207}\) to permit the generic listing and trading of certain new derivatives securities products—including ETPs—the Commission again emphasized the importance of the listing exchange’s ability to obtain from underlying markets, through surveillance-sharing agreements (called information-sharing agreements or “ISAs” in the release), the information necessary to detect and deter manipulative activity. Specifically, in adopting rules governing the generic listing of new derivatives securities products, the Commission stated that the Rule 19b–4(e) procedures would “enable the Commission to continue to effectively protect investors and promote the public interest” and stated that:

It is essential that the SRO have the ability to obtain the information necessary to detect and deter market manipulation, illegal trading and other abuses involving the new derivative securities product. Specifically, there should be a comprehensive ISA [information-sharing agreement] that covers trading in the new derivative securities product and its underlying securities in place between the SRO listing or trading a derivative product and the markets trading the securities underlying the new derivative securities product. Such agreements provide a necessary deterrent to manipulation because they facilitate the availability of information needed to fully investigate a manipulation if it were to occur.\(^{208}\)

Consistent with this principle, for the commodity-trust ETPs approved to date for listing and trading, there has been in every case at least one significant, regulated market for trading futures on the underlying commodity—whether gold, silver, platinum, palladium, or copper—and the ETP listing exchange has entered into surveillance-sharing agreements with, or held Intermarket Surveillance Group membership in common with, that market.\(^{209}\)

In light of the history and purpose of looking to surveillance-sharing agreements, with respect to markets for assets underlying an ETP or for derivatives on those assets, the Commission interprets the terms “significant market” and “market of significant size” to include a market (or group of markets) as to which (a) there is a reasonable likelihood that a person attempting to manipulate the ETP would also have to trade on that market to successfully manipulate the ETP, so that a surveillance-sharing agreement would assist the ETP listing market in detecting and deterring misconduct, and (b) it is unlikely that trading in the ETP would be the predominant influence on prices in that market. This definition is illustrative and not exclusive. There could be other types of “significant markets” and “markets of significant size,” but this definition is an example that will provide guidance to market participants.

(b) Response to Comments Regarding Surveillance-Sharing Agreements and Prior Commodity-Trust ETP Approvals

Prior ETP approval orders are consistent with the standards the Commission is applying to the BZX proposal. However, more recent approval orders for the well-established model of a precious-metal trust—for example, the Platinum Order and the Palladium Order—found it unnecessary to perform the exhaustive analysis of underlying markets and surveillance sharing provided by the first approval order for a precious metal commodity-trust ETP, the Gold Order, especially since the proposed rule change for platinum and palladium ETPs discussed surveillance-sharing agreements with significant, regulated platinum and palladium markets.\(^{210}\)

BZX argues that even the Gold Order relied on alternative factors—primarily the depth and liquidity of the spot gold market—to mitigate Commission concerns about approving a commodity-trust ETP based on an asset that traded in unregulated, over-the-counter markets with which no surveillance-sharing agreement could be executed.\(^{211}\) The Gold Order does note the depth and liquidity of the gold market, likening the spot gold market to the “extremely large, diverse market” for OTC foreign exchange trading.\(^{212}\) Significantly, however, the Gold Order demonstrates that the Commission did take into account the availability of surveillance-sharing agreements in approving the first commodity-trust ETP.

The Gold Order states that “[t]he ability to obtain relevant surveillance information, including, among other things, the identity of the ultimate purchasers and sellers of securities, is an essential and necessary component of a comprehensive surveillance sharing agreement.”\(^{213}\)

\(^{207}\) See Gold Order, supra note 197, 69 FR at 64614–15. BZX argued that the Gold Order, supra note 189, 74 FR at 68887–88; Palladium Order, supra note 189, 74 FR at 68896.


\(^{209}\) See supra note 21.

\(^{210}\) See supra note 204.

\(^{211}\) Id.

\(^{212}\) Id. (emphasis added).

\(^{213}\) Id.

\(^{214}\) See id. In the Gold Order, the Commission also stated that the ETP listing exchange had “entered into a reciprocal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the NYMEX [of which COMEX is a division] for the sharing of information relating to any financial instrument based, in whole or in part, upon an interest in or performance of gold.” Id. at 64618. The Gold Order also notes volume figures for spot gold trading provided by the London Bullion Market Association and gold futures trading provided by COMEX. See id. at 64619.

\(^{215}\) See supra note 202.
approved commodity-trust ETPs holding those metals.218

Consistent with the discussion of “significant market” described above,219 the Commission has not previously, and does not now, require that an ETP listing exchange be able to enter into a surveillance-sharing agreement with each regulated spot or derivatives market relating to an underlying asset, provided that the market or markets with which there is such an agreement constitute a “significant market.”

While BZX and the Overdahl Letter assert that the potential avenues for manipulation of the bitcoin market also exist in the context of other commodity-trust ETPs, this argument merely reinforces the Commission’s view that similar market structures—namely, surveillance-sharing agreements with significant, regulated markets—should be in place for a bitcoin-trust ETP just as they are for commodity-trust ETPs.220 BZX also argues that the proposal should be approved because it is “near-identical” to the iShares Copper Trust. In particular, BZX asserts that the Commission approved the iShares Copper Trust because the Commission believed that approval of the ETP could reduce the risk of manipulation in the underlying spot market and that the Commission could rely on surveillance by the listing exchange and CFTC jurisdiction to address concerns about manipulation—factors it argues support approval here.221 The Copper Order, however, specifically noted the existence of surveillance-sharing agreements not only between the ETP listing market and copper futures markets, but also between the ETP listing market and a significant copper spot market, the London Metal Exchange.222 And the Copper Order’s analysis of the underlying physical market for copper does not reflect a determination that these factors could serve as an adequate alternative to a surveillance-sharing agreement, but was instead a response to certain commenters’ arguments that approving the iShares Copper Trust would affirmatively disrupt the physical copper market.223

BZX argues that the Commission should approve the proposal because it has previously approved currency-trust ETPs—the CurrencyShares Hong Kong Dollar Trust and the CurrencyShares Singapore Dollar Trust—without requiring the existence of a surveillance-sharing agreement with underlying markets.224 However, BZX has proposed to list and trade the Shares as a commodity-based ETF, not a currency-based ETP, and the Commission as well as other agencies have distinguished bitcoin from currency.225

218 See Exchange Act Release No. 60971 (Nov. 9, 2009), 74 FR 59328, 59328–86, 59391 (Nov. 17, 2009) (SR–NYSEArca—2009–94) (notice of proposed rule change for ETFS Palladium Trust includes NYSE Arca’s representation that “NYMEX is the largest exchange in the world for trading precious metals futures and options and has been trading palladium since 1974,” and that NYSE Arca “may obtain trading information via the Intermarket Surveillance Group,” of which NYMEX is a member); Exchange Act Release No. 60970 (Nov. 9, 2009), 74 FR 59319, 59321, 59327 (Nov. 17, 2009) (SR–NYSEArca—2009–95) (notice of proposed rule change for ETFS Platinum Trust includes NYSE Arca’s representation that “NYMEX is the largest exchange in the world for trading precious metals futures and options and has been trading platinum since 1974,” and that NYSE Arca “may obtain trading information via the Intermarket Surveillance Group,” of which NYMEX is a member). See also supra note 189 and accompanying text.

219 See Section III.D.2(a), supra.

220 The proposal does not involve an ETP that is based on an index of commodities where the component commodities are subject to surveillance-sharing agreements with significant, regulated markets. See Exchange Act Release No. 53105 (Jan. 11, 2006), 71 FR 3129, 3136 (Jan. 19, 2006) (SR–Amex–2005–059) (approving DB Commodity Index Tracking Fund based on an index that tracks the performance of futures contracts on crude oil, heating oil, aluminum, gold, corn, and wheat).

221 See supra notes 194–195 and accompanying text. The Lewis Letter makes a similar argument. See supra note 196 and accompanying text.

222 See Copper Order, supra note 194, 78 FR at 13727 n.7, and 13730.

223 See id. at 13731–33.

224 See supra note 209 and accompanying text. Another commenter also asserts that the Commission has approved several foreign exchange-linked ETPs where the underlying market is either unregulated or lightly regulated. See Convergex Letter, supra note 36, at 2.

225 See Amendment No. 1, supra note 1, 81 FR at 76651.


Even if the Commission were to apply the approach it took in approving currency-trust ETPs, the Commission would still conclude that the proposal is not consistent with the Exchange Act, because the deep, liquid, and longstanding markets for currencies, which are dominated by regulated entities, bear little resemblance to the current state of bitcoin markets. Foreign currency derivatives traded on national securities exchanges for decades before the Commission approved currency-trust ETPs. And when it approved the first foreign currency derivatives in 1982—options on the British pound, the German mark, the Swiss franc, the Canadian dollar, and the Japanese yen, each the sovereign currency of a developed nation—the Commission explained that “[t]he magnitude of the related foreign currency markets would appear to militate against a successful manipulation through inter-market trading activity.”227 Similarly, when approving the listing and trading of additional foreign currency derivatives in 1992, the Commission recognized the “developed markets for the component foreign currencies” and observed that “the interbank foreign currency spot market is an extremely large, diverse market comprised of banks and other financial institutions worldwide.”228

The Gold Order echoed this view of the currency markets.229 And the approval order for the CurrencyShares product that BZX cites includes the following representations by the listing exchange regarding the foreign currency markets:

Most trading in the global over-the-counter (“OTC”) foreign currency markets is conducted by regulated financial institutions such as banks and broker-dealers. In addition, in the United States, the Foreign Exchange Committee of the New York Federal Reserve Bank has issued Guidelines for Foreign Exchange Trading, and central-bank sponsored committees in Japan and Singapore have published similar best practice guidelines. In the United Kingdom, the Bank of England has published the Non-Deposit Products Code, which covers foreign currency trading. The Financial Markets Association, whose members include major international banking organizations, has also established best practices guidelines called the Model Code. Participants in the U.S. OTC market for


229 See Gold Order, supra note 197, 69 FR at 64619.
foreign currencies are generally regulated by their oversight regulators.230

Neither BZX nor any of the commenters has provided data that would justify treating the markets for bitcoin similarly to the deep and liquid markets for fiat currencies. Moreover, the description of the worldwide market for bitcoin, in which both the trading venues and the participants are unregulated, bears little resemblance to the OTC markets for foreign currency, on which most trading is conducted by regulated financial institutions. Accordingly, the Commission’s previous approvals of derivatives securities products based on foreign currencies are not a basis for the Commission to approve the proposal despite the absence of a surveillance-sharing agreement with a regulated market of significant size related to bitcoin.

E. Whether BZX Has Entered Into Surveillance-Sharing Agreements With Regulated Markets of Significant Size Related to Bitcoin

Although BZX asserts that it has entered into a comprehensive surveillance-sharing agreement with the Gemini Exchange with respect to bitcoin trading and that the Gemini Exchange is supervised by the NYSEDF, the record does not establish that the Gemini Exchange is a “regulated market” comparable to a national securities exchange or to the futures exchanges that are associated with the underlying assets of the commodity-trust ETPs approved to date. Even if the Gemini Exchange were “regulated,” the record does not support a finding that the Gemini Exchange represents a “significant” bitcoin-related market. Accordingly, the Commission finds that the surveillance-sharing agreement between BZX and the Gemini Exchange, even in combination with alternative means of detecting and deterring fraud and manipulation, is insufficient to demonstrate that the proposed rule change is consistent with Exchange Act Section 6(b)(5). Nor has BZX demonstrated that any of the current trading venues in the worldwide bitcoin spot market is a regulated market such that a comprehensive surveillance-sharing agreement with those venues would satisfy the requirements of Section 6(b)(5). And BZX has likewise failed to carry its burden to demonstrate that there is a regulated market of significant size in derivatives related to bitcoin with which the ETP listing market has entered into a comprehensive surveillance-sharing agreement.

1. The Gemini Exchange

(a) Summary of Comments Received

BZX asserts that it has entered into a comprehensive surveillance-sharing agreement with the Gemini Exchange through which it can obtain customer identity information about bitcoin transactions and market data.231 Similarly, the Overdahl Letter claims that the surveillance-sharing agreement between the Gemini Exchange and BZX aims to detect and deter such conduct and that the agreement allows for continuous monitoring of trading activity to effectively conduct surveillance of the Gemini Auction price.232 BZX represents that the Gemini Exchange operates under the direct supervision and regulatory authority of the NYSEDF.233 This is because, BZX argues, the Gemini Exchange is a facility of the Custodian, which is a New York State-chartered limited liability trust company.234 BZX also represents that the Custodian is a fiduciary and that it must meet the capitalization, compliance, anti-money-laundering, consumer protection, and cyber security requirements set forth by the NYSEDF.235 BZX asserts that the Gemini Auction typically already transacts a volume greater than the proposed creation basket size for the Trust and that the Gemini Auction would likely support the needs of Authorized Participants to engage in basket creation or redemption.236 BZX claims that the global bitcoin marketplace has the potential to provide even more liquidity and to be a source of bitcoin for basket creation and hedging. BZX also asserts that all intraday order-book and trade information on the Gemini Exchange is publically available through various electronic formats and is also redistributed by various online aggregators, and that, with the launch of the proposed Trust, the Sponsor must make important pricing data available in real time.237 As noted above, BZX also claims that the volume transacted in the Gemini Auction is generally more than 50% larger than the second-largest trade in the world, drawing an average daily volume of 1,200 bitcoins compared to approximately 800 bitcoins.238

One commenter claims that among USD bitcoin exchanges, Gemini has a 3% share and its liquidity measured by order book depth is significantly lower than that of several other exchanges. The commenter states that it is possible that, after the launch of an ETP, Gemini’s liquidity and volume will increase, but claims that the nature of bitcoin trading that leads to the concentration of volume and liquidity outside of U.S. borders makes any significant future increase unlikely.239 This commenter also observes that while Gemini is locally regulated by the NYSEDF, the global landscape of many unregulated bitcoin exchanges exerts huge influence on the Gemini Exchange and consequently on the proposed ETP.240 Another commenter claims that the Gemini Exchange has the lowest liquidity of the three exchanges in the United States and is one of the least-liquid of all exchanges that trade bitcoin for USD.241

One commenter asserts that the size and importance of the Gemini Exchange and the itBit Exchange have grown substantially and claims that, from January 23, 2017, to May 10, 2017, the combined market share of these exchanges jumped from just 0.33% to 7.14% of total worldwide bitcoin volume, equivalent to more than 10,000 bitcoins per day on average.242 This commenter also asserts that the geographic distribution of bitcoin spot trading has shifted in focus from Chinese-based platforms towards U.S.-based venues, which indicates increased transparency and safer regulation in the near future. The commenter asserts that—although the Gemini Exchange and the itBit Exchange remain the only two NYSEDF-regulated bitcoin exchanges, and while a market share of 7.14% leaves much room for growth—


231See Amendment No. 1, supra note 1, 81 FR at 76663, 76668; BZX Letter II, supra note 13, at 29–30.

232See Overdahl Letter, supra note 36, at 11.

233See Amendment No. 1, supra note 1, 81 FR at 76651–52.

234See id. at 76652.

235See id.

236See BZX Letter II, supra note 13, at 20; but see Section III.B.2(b), supra.

237See BZX Letter I, supra note 35, at 9; see also Petition for Review, supra note 4, at 15–16.


239See Maher Letter, supra note 35 (noting that the market is very concentrated and is controlled by a small group of exchanges operating in China, three of which represented 96% of all bitcoin trade volume over a six-month period, and noting that the Gemini Exchange had a 0.07% share of bitcoin volume worldwide during that period, with a 3% share of USD-exchange volume).

240See id.

241See Anonymous Letter III, supra note 35.

the migration of global bitcoin trading volumes since mid-January 2017 is a positive trend.\textsuperscript{243} This commenter further asserts that, alongside Gemini Exchange and itBit Exchange, two other U.S.-based exchanges, GDAX and Kraken, have become significant spot bitcoin trading venues. According to this commenter, these four exchanges—the largest U.S. bitcoin exchanges—together now represent over 29\% of worldwide bitcoin volume, up from just 1.47\% on January 23, 2017. The commenter claims that, with almost a third of global spot bitcoin volume now occurring on these four U.S.-based trading venues, regulatory agencies and SROs have the opportunity to develop a robust framework of regulatory oversight and transparency that would support fair and orderly markets for both spot bitcoin and listed bitcoin-based ETPs.\textsuperscript{244} This commenter predicts that the launch of a regulated, U.S.-listed bitcoin ETP will help drive more bitcoin trading volume onto U.S.-based exchanges, and this commenter asserts that this supplemental liquidity is likely to manifest itself mainly on U.S.-based bitcoin exchanges such as Gemini, itBit, GDAX, and Kraken, which will be the most liquid venues during U.S. trading hours.\textsuperscript{245}

The Overdahl Letter asserts that, between September 21, 2016, and March 1, 2017, the Gemini Exchange accounted for 24.03\% of bitcoin trading volume on U.S. exchanges and 7.35\% of the global USD market for bitcoin.\textsuperscript{246} The Overdahl Letter contends that the Gemini Auction price is reliable in that it generally reflects both prices for bitcoin traded at other U.S.-based bitcoin exchanges and prices for bitcoin traded at USD-based exchanges globally. The Overdahl Letter claims that significant deviations between the Gemini price and other prices are quickly reduced to normal (small) levels and that the Gemini price does not primarily cause these deviations. In addition, the Overdahl Letter concludes that, when price deviations are observed, pricing across exchanges tends to converge.\textsuperscript{247} The Overdahl Letter also notes the concern expressed by some commenters that the Gemini Exchange had relatively low trading volume and that, as a result, the exchange price was less reliable than if the volumes were larger. In response to this concern, the Overdahl Letter provides a list of ETPs approved by the Commission that, the Overdahl Letter claims, have underlying assets with lower average daily volume than the average daily volume of the Gemini Exchange.\textsuperscript{248}

(b) Discussion

BZX represents that it has entered into a comprehensive surveillance-sharing agreement with the Gemini Exchange with respect to bitcoin trading and that the Gemini Exchange is supervised by the NYSDFS and is thereby subject to capitalization, anti-money-laundering, compliance, consumer protection, and cybersecurity requirements.\textsuperscript{249} The record, however, does not support a conclusion that the Gemini Exchange is a “regulated market” comparable to a national securities exchange or to the futures exchanges that are associated with the underlying assets of the commodity-trust ETPs approved to date.\textsuperscript{250} The record does not establish that the Gemini Exchange’s rules, including its trading rules, are subject to regulatory review or approval or that its trading operations are subject to regulatory examination. Commission regulation of the securities markets includes the elements of NYSDFS supervision described above,\textsuperscript{251} but national securities exchanges are also, among other things, required to have rules that are “designed to prevent fraudulent and manipulative acts and practices, to promote just and equitable principles of trade, to foster cooperation and coordination with persons engaged in regulating, clearing, settling, processing information with respect to, and facilitating transactions in securities, to remove impediments to and perfect the mechanism of a free and open market and a national market system, and, in general, to protect investors and the public interest.”\textsuperscript{252} Moreover, national securities exchanges must file proposed rules with the Commission regarding certain material aspects of their operations,\textsuperscript{253} and the Commission has the authority to disapprove any such rule that is not consistent with the requirements of the Exchange Act.\textsuperscript{254}

Thus, national securities exchanges are subject to Commission oversight of, among other things, their governance, membership qualifications, trading rules, disciplinary procedures, recordkeeping, and fees.\textsuperscript{255}

Even if the Gemini Exchange were “regulated,” the record would not support a conclusion that the Gemini Exchange conducts a significant volume of trading in bitcoin because there is no evidence in the record that there is a reasonable likelihood that a person attempting to manipulate the ETP would also have to trade on the Gemini Exchange (or any record evidence addressing how trading in the proposed ETP would or would not influence prices on the Gemini Exchange).

Furthermore, there is insufficient evidence in the record to determine whether it is unlikely that trading in the ETP would be the predominant influence on prices on the Gemini Exchange. Indeed, if anything, the Gemini Auction size is currently so small that the proposed ETP could fundamentally affect supply and demand (and thus pricing) on the Gemini Exchange, not the other way around.\textsuperscript{256}

The record thus includes at best uncertain information regarding the volume or liquidity of the Gemini Exchange, how the Gemini Exchange may influence the price of any ETP based on bitcoin, or how the existence of ETPs based on bitcoin may affect the Gemini Exchange. Commenters have provided varying estimates of the current and future volume of trading on proposed rule changes with the Commission and provides the Commission with the authority to disapprove proposed rule changes that are not consistent with the Exchange Act. Designated Contract Markets (commonly called “futures markets”) registered with and regulated by the CFTC must comply with, among other things, a similarly comprehensive range of regulatory principles and must file rule changes with the CFTC. See, e.g., Designated Contract Markets (DCMs), CFTC, available at http://www.cftc.gov/IndustryOversight/TradingOrganizations/DCMs/index.htm.

The Commission notes that the NYSDFS recently issued “guidance” to supervised virtual currency business entities, including the Gemini Exchange, stating that these entities must “implement measures designed to effectively detect, prevent, and respond to fraud, attempted fraud, and similar wrongdoing.” See Maria T. Vulio, Superintendent of Financial Services, NYSDFS, Guidance on Prevention of Market Manipulation and Other Wrongful Activity (Feb. 7, 2018), available at http://www.dfs.ny.gov/legal/industry/ill180207.pdf. This guidance was issued after the comment period for the proposed rule changes ended, and there is nothing in the record regarding how this guidance has been implemented by the NYSDFS or by the affected entities.\textsuperscript{257} See Section III.B.2(b), supra.
the Gemini Exchange.\textsuperscript{256} Moreover, because bitcoin markets are still evolving in significant ways, and because there is no comprehensive data source reflecting bitcoin trading, it is not currently possible to state with confidence what share of volume any particular spot trading venue has captured or will capture.\textsuperscript{257} Bitcoin trading activity is dispersed across markets and OTC transactions worldwide, and there is no centralized, regulatory data source for bitcoin trading statistics. Accordingly, any analysis of worldwide trading activity must use unofficial sources that gather and disseminate trading data, and even these sources cannot capture OTC transactions, or transactions that take place in what the Registration Statement characterizes as “dark pools.”\textsuperscript{258} Further, as discussed above,\textsuperscript{259} recent volume in the Gemini Auction is a fraction of the size of a creation unit of the Trust, and therefore the Commission does not agree with the assertion by BZX that the Gemini Auction would support the needs of Authorized Participants to engage in basket creation or redemption.

Finally, the comparison offered by the Overdahl Letter between the average trading volume on the Gemini Exchange and the average trading volume of the underlying assets of other ETPs is inapt.\textsuperscript{260} The issue here is not that the Gemini Exchange has low trading volume in an absolute sense but, rather, that the Trust would value its holdings using the Gemini Auction price, even though there is no basis in the record to find that the Gemini Auction represents a significant portion of worldwide bitcoin trading.\textsuperscript{261}

Therefore, the Commission cannot conclude that the surveillance-sharing agreement between BZX and the Gemini Exchange, even in combination with the other means of detecting and deterring fraud and manipulation discussed above,\textsuperscript{262} is sufficient to find that the proposal is consistent with Exchange Act Section 6(b)(5).

2. Other Bitcoin Spot Markets

(a) Summary of Comments Received

Several comment letters state that the majority of bitcoin trading occurs on exchanges outside the United States. One commenter claims that most daily trading volume is conducted on poorly capitalized, unregulated exchanges located outside the United States and that these non-U.S. exchanges and their practices significantly influence the price discovery process.\textsuperscript{263} Another commenter states that the biggest and most influential bitcoin exchange is located outside U.S. jurisdiction.\textsuperscript{264} One commenter notes that, since 2013, the price of bitcoin has been defined mostly by the major Chinese exchanges, whose volumes dwarf those of exchanges outside China. According to the commenter, the Chinese exchanges are not regulated or audited and are suspected of engaging in unethical practices such as front-running, wash trades, and trading with insufficient funds. The commenter interprets pricing data from these Chinese exchanges to mean that the price of bitcoin is defined entirely by speculation, without any ties to fundamentals.\textsuperscript{265}

One commenter claims that a sizeable number of traders and owners of bitcoin do not desire to trade in a well-regulated environment for reasons including tax evasion, evading capital controls, and money laundering. This commenter also states that U.S. bitcoin exchanges do not offer products such as fee-free trading, margin trading, or options, which drive traffic to the top non-U.S. exchanges. This commenter also claims that several Chinese exchanges actively engage in bitcoin mining operations, creating a conflict of interest, and notes that these exchanges are unaccountable.\textsuperscript{266} One commenter observes that Chinese exchanges make up a significant portion of the global spot markets.\textsuperscript{267} Another commenter also claims that the Chinese exchanges that account for the bulk of trading are subject to little regulatory oversight and that existing know-your-customer or identity-verification measures are lax and can be easily bypassed.\textsuperscript{268}

One commenter asserts that bitcoin is more transparent than the illiquid or opaque underlying assets of some other exchange-traded funds, because a large percentage of bitcoin transactions take place on electronic exchanges with actionable quotes and relatively tight bid/ask spreads and because transferring actual bitcoin between accounts at exchanges and other storage systems is also a transparent process, as transactions are printed using blockchain technology.\textsuperscript{269} BZX concedes in a comment letter that only a minority of the global spot bitcoin exchanges are subject to any regulatory regime.\textsuperscript{270} BZX also argues that, as the bitcoin exchange market has matured, a number of new entrants, including two New York limited-purpose trust companies, have emerged and that these new entrants have markedly changed the once-concentrated and non-regulated landscape of the bitcoin exchange market.\textsuperscript{271}

BZX and the Overdahl Letter note that the CFTC has designated bitcoin as a commodity and that the CFTC is “broadly responsible for the integrity” of bitcoin spot markets.\textsuperscript{272} BZX acknowledges that the CFTC had not yet (as of the date of BZX’s submissions) brought any enforcement actions based on the anti-manipulation provisions of the Commodity Exchange Act,\textsuperscript{273} but notes that the CFTC has issued orders against U.S. and non-U.S. bitcoin exchanges for engaging in other activity prohibited by the Commodity Exchange Act and argues that, therefore, a regulatory framework for providing oversight and deterring market manipulation currently exists in the U.S.\textsuperscript{274}

The Overdahl Letter asserts that any market can potentially be manipulated and states that this manipulation risk is
why the CFTC and the Commission have anti-manipulation authority.\textsuperscript{275} The Overdahl Letter also asserts that a host of other jurisdictions, including the U.K., Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand, have established some form of “regulatory sandbox” for blockchain, the technology that underlies bitcoin. The Overdahl Letter further asserts that, in March 2016, the Japanese cabinet approved bills treating bitcoin and other digital currencies as forms of money and that, in April 2017, Japan’s parliament recognized bitcoin as an authorized method of payment. The Overdahl Letter claims that Japan regulates bitcoin as a form of prepaid payment and is approving regulated virtual-currency exchanges on which the Japanese regulator imposes capital, audit, and anti-money-laundering, and know-your-customer requirements. The Overdahl Letter concludes that, therefore, aside from the CFTC, another competent regulator with whom the Commission has a memorandum of understanding maintains a regulated bitcoin market.\textsuperscript{276}

(b) Discussion

Based on the record before it, the Commission concludes that BZX has not shown that any of the current trading venues in the worldwide bitcoin spot market is a regulated market.

With respect to spot bitcoin trading outside the United States, BZX and commenters agree that the bulk of bitcoin trading has occurred in non-U.S. markets where there is little to no regulation governing trading,\textsuperscript{277} and thus no sufficient and verifiable governmental market oversight designed to detect and deter fraudulent and manipulative activity.\textsuperscript{278} And because no bitcoin spot market is currently a member of the Intermarket Surveillance Group, BZX is unable to use its membership in the Intermarket Surveillance Group to share surveillance information with those

\textsuperscript{275} See Overdahl Letter, supra note 36, at 2, 9–10.

\textsuperscript{276} See id. at 12–13.

\textsuperscript{277} See supra notes 263–268, 270 and accompanying text. The Commission also notes more recent reporting that a large portion of bitcoin trading volume continues to take place overseas, see, e.g., Russo et al., This Is Where People Are Buying Bitcoin All Over the World (Jan. 11, 2018), https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2017-bitcoin-volume/, although such reports are unnecessary to the Commission’s finding, based on the record before it, that BZX has not shown that any of the current trading venues in the worldwide bitcoin spot market is a regulated market.

\textsuperscript{278} See supra notes 263–268 and accompanying text.
most derivatives activity within the bitcoin markets is offered by entities outside of the purview of U.S. regulators.292 The commenter observes that the lack of a robust and regulated derivatives market means that market participants do not have a broad basket of tools at their disposal, making hedging difficult and keeping away many market makers that provide significant liquidity to traditional capital markets. The commenter claims that, while derivative products may be in development, a full suite of investor tools that will drive market efficiency and eliminate price disparities is likely at least a couple of years away.293 The commenter also states that, without a robust derivatives market for institutional investors to short the underlying asset or otherwise hedge their positions, there likely would be little counterbalance to the new demand generated by the ETP, and Authorized Participants could then have trouble sourcing bitcoin and hedging their positions, stalling the creation process.294 The commenter concludes that it would be premature to launch a bitcoin ETP because bitcoin markets are not liquid enough to support an open-end fund and because an ecosystem of institutional-grade infrastructure players is not yet available to support such a product.295

One commenter disagrees with assertions linking inefficient bitcoin markets to nascent derivatives markets, stating that no evidence has been provided regarding the would-be effect of derivatives on the bitcoin market. The commenter claims that these assertions assume that bitcoin pricing is inefficient, which the commenter claims is not the case. The commenter also claims that these assertions assume that the lack of a derivatives market causes pricing to be inefficient, stating instead that there is direct evidence that many securities trade successfully and efficiently in U.S. and non-U.S. exchanges despite not having a direct derivatives market.296 The commenter also disagrees with the claim that, absent a robust derivatives market, there would be little counterbalance to the new demand generated by the ETP, stating that it is impossible to predict the success or failure of the ETP. The commenter states that Authorized Participants may be able to source bitcoin from China.297

Another commenter claims that there are several bitcoin futures markets that have a significant impact on the spot price along with several OTC markets—such as the one that this commenter claims was recently launched by the Gemini Exchange—that also offer liquidity.298 The Lewis Letter states that one of the key differences between bitcoin and other commodities is the lack of a liquid and transparent derivatives market and that, although there have been nascent attempts to establish derivatives trading in bitcoin, bitcoin derivatives markets are not at this time sufficiently liquid to be useful to Authorized Participants and market makers who would like to use derivatives to hedge exposures.299 The Lewis Letter claims that, for physical commodities that are not traded on exchanges, the presence of a liquid derivatives market is a necessary condition, but claims that for digital assets like bitcoin, derivatives markets are not necessary because price discovery occurs on the OTC market and exchanges instead.300

(b) Discussion

One commenter and the Lewis Letter assert that the existence of bitcoin derivative markets is not a necessary condition for a bitcoin ETP.301 The key standard the Commission is applying here, however, is not that a futures or derivatives market is required for every commodity-trust ETP, but that—when the spot market is unregulated—the requirement of preventing fraudulent and manipulative acts may possibly be satisfied by showing that the ETP listing market has entered into a surveillance-sharing agreement with a regulated market of significant size in derivatives related to the underlying asset. That is because, where a market of significant size exists with respect to derivatives on the asset underlying a commodity-trust ETP, the Commission believes that there is a reasonable likelihood that a person attempting to manipulate the ETP by manipulating the underlying spot market would also have to trade in the derivatives market in order to succeed, since arbitrage between the derivative and spot markets would tend to counter an attempt to manipulate the spot market alone.302 Thus, the Commission believes that there is a reasonable likelihood that a surveillance-sharing agreement with that derivatives market would assist the ETP listing market in detecting and deterring an attempt to manipulate the commodity-trust ETP.

As noted above, the commodity-trust ETPs previously approved by the Commission have had—in lieu of regulated spot markets of significant size—a regulated futures market of significant size associated with the underlying commodity, and the listing exchange had entered into a surveillance-sharing agreement with that futures market or was able to obtain surveillance information through membership in the Intermarket Surveillance Group.303 Based on the record before it, the Commission cannot conclude that a regulated bitcoin futures market of significant size currently exists because, similar to the Gemini Exchange, there is no evidence in the record that there is a reasonable likelihood that a person attempting to manipulate the ETP would also have to trade on the bitcoin futures market, or any record evidence addressing how trading in the proposed ETP would or would not influence prices in the futures bitcoin market.

Consistent with the view of commenters summarized above, BZX’s proposal describes the current derivative markets for bitcoin as “[n]ascent.”304 BZX notes that certain types of options, futures, contracts for differences, and other derivative instruments are available in certain jurisdictions, but that many of them are not available in the United States and that these derivatives instruments are generally not regulated “to the degree that U.S. investors expect derivatives instruments to be regulated.”305 BZX notes that the CFTC has approved the registration of TeraExchange LLC as a swap execution facility (“SEF”) and that, on October 9, 2014, TeraExchange announced that it had hosted the first executed bitcoin swap traded on a CFTC-regulated platform.306 Further,
BZX’s proposal notes that, in 2015, CFTC temporarily registered another SEF that would trade swaps on bitcoin.307 The Commission acknowledges that TeraExchange, a market for swaps on bitcoin, has registered with the CFTC, but BZX’s description of trading activity on that market fails to note that the very activity it cites was the subject of an enforcement action by the CFTC. The CFTC found that TeraExchange had improperly arranged for participants to make prearranged, offsetting “wash” transactions of the same price, notional amount, and time period and had then issued a press release “to create the impression of actual trading in the Bitcoin swap.”308 Neither BZX nor any commenter provides evidence of meaningful trading volume in bitcoin derivatives on any regulated marketplace.

The CFTC has also registered LedgerX, a venue for trading bitcoin derivatives, as a SEF and a Derivatives Clearing Organization.309 Additionally, on December 1, 2017, the CFE and the CME self-certified new contracts with the CFTC for bitcoin futures contracts.310 CFE launched trading in its bitcoin futures contracts on December 10, 2017, and CME launched trading in its bitcoin futures contracts on December 17, 2017 (for a trade date of December 18, 2017).311 The record before the Commission, however, does not establish that the bitcoin derivatives markets are regulated markets of significant size. The record also does not establish how these markets may influence the price of any ETP based on bitcoin or how the existence of ETPs based on bitcoin may affect these markets. Publicly available data show that the median daily notional trading volume, from inception through April 24, 2018, has been 9,180 bitcoins on CME and 5,440 bitcoins on CFE, and that the median daily notional value of open interest on CME and CFE during the same period has been 7,875 bitcoins and 5,787 bitcoins, respectively.312 For all bitcoin contracts traded on LedgerX from inception through April 24, 2018, publicly available data show that the median daily notional volume has been 55 bitcoins, while the median daily notional value of open interest has been 663 bitcoins.313 But while these futures and derivative contract figures are readily available, meaningful analysis of the size of the CME, CFE, and LedgerX markets relative to the underlying bitcoin spot market is challenging, because reliable data about the spot market, including its overall size, are unavailable.314 The Commission notes that in recent testimony CFTC Chairman Giancarlo characterized the volume of the bitcoin futures markets as “‘quite small.’”315 The Commission also notes that the President and COO of Cboe recently acknowledged in a letter to the Commission staff that “the current bitcoin futures trading volumes on Cboe Futures Exchange and CME may not currently be sufficient to support ETPs seeking 100% long or short exposure to bitcoin.”316 These statements reinforce the Commission’s conclusion that there is insufficient evidence to determine that the bitcoin derivatives markets are significant.

Thus, while LedgerX, CME, and CFE are regulated markets for bitcoin derivatives, there is no basis in the record for the Commission to conclude that these markets are of significant size. Additionally, because bitcoin futures have been trading on CME and CFE only since December 2017, the Commission has no basis on which to predict how these markets may grow or develop over time, or whether or when they may reach significant size.

Although BZX has not demonstrated that a regulated bitcoin futures market of significant size currently exists, the Commission is not suggesting that the development of such a market would automatically require approval of a proposed rule change seeking to list and trade shares of an ETP holding bitcoins as an asset. The Commission would need to analyze the facts and circumstances of any particular proposal and examine whether any unique features of a bitcoin futures market would warrant further analysis before approval.

F. The Protection of Investors and the Public Interest

BZX contends that, if approved, its ETP would protect investors and promote the public interest, but the Commission finds that BZX has not made such a showing on the current record. The Commission must consider any potential benefits in the broader context of whether the proposal meets each of the applicable requirements of the Exchange Act. And because BZX has not demonstrated that its proposed rule change is designed to prevent fraudulent and manipulative acts and practices, the Commission must disapprove the proposal.

1. Summary of Comments Received

Several commenters asserted that access to bitcoin through an ETP would extend regulatory protections to investors. One commenter asserts that, if the U.S. were to approve an ETP and bring regulatory standards and oversight to cryptocurrencies, investors would not see major problems as they did with the Bitfinex and Mt. Gox hacks and that, if the ETP were not approved, investors would be forced to use those less-than-ideal exchanges.317 One commenter asserts that the alternative to a regulated ETP is investors having to purchase

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307 See Amendment No. 1, supra note 1, 81 FR at 76661 (referring to Ledger X LLC).
308 See TeraExchange Settlement Order, supra note 3.
311 The Commission notes that the Cantor Exchange has also self-certified bitcoin binary options, see CFTC Backgrounder, supra note 118, at 2, but this product has not yet begun to trade.
312 These future volumes were calculated by Commission staff using data published by CME and CFE on their websites.
313 These derivative contract volume figures were calculated by Commission staff using data published by LedgerX on its website.
314 See Section III.B.1(b)(i), supra.
315 CFTC Chairman Giancarlo testified: “It is important to put the new Bitcoin futures market in perspective. It is quite small with open interest at the CME of 6,655 bitcoin and at Cboe Futures Exchange (Cboe) of 5,869 bitcoin (as of Feb. 2, 2018). At a price of approximately $7,700 per Bitcoin, this represents a notional amount of about $94 million. In comparison, the notional amount of the open interest in CME’s WTI crude oil futures was more than one thousand times greater, about $170 billion (2,600,000 contracts) as of Feb. 2, 2018 and the notional amount represented by the open interest of futures contracts was about $74 billion ($549,000 contracts).” Giancarlo Testimony, supra note 117, text accompanying nn.14–15.
bitcoin at unregulated exchanges lacking SEC oversight.\textsuperscript{318} One commenter asserts that disapproval of the ETP would create a more risky environment for investors, who will not have the option of investing through regulated exchanges.\textsuperscript{319} One commenter argues that, because of the use of an auction process to determine NAV, the use of well-known and respected Authorized Participants, and the environment that allows market participants to use arbitrage techniques to hold pricing where it should be, the risk to investors who invest in the ETP may be lower than the risk borne by those who buy or sell bitcoin directly.\textsuperscript{320} And another commenter asserts that, with innovative use cases emerging for bitcoin and for the associated technology of blockchain each passing day, investors seeking exposure to bitcoin should have options similar to those currently available for physical bullion.\textsuperscript{321}

BZX argues that the Shares would significantly reduce or eliminate costs and inefficiencies and would expand opportunities for investors by providing an inexpensive vehicle to gain exposure to bitcoin in a secure and easily accessible product that is familiar, transparent, and meaningfully regulated.\textsuperscript{322} It asserts that, for prospective investors in bitcoin, direct investment brings with it significant inconvenience, complexity, expense, and risk. As investor demand for exposure to bitcoin continues to increase, BZX asserts, these problems grow larger. BZX argues that the Shares would significantly reduce or completely remove each of these hurdles.\textsuperscript{323} BZX also argues that Commission should approve the proposal because Commission oversight of the trading of the ETP shares on a national securities exchange would enhance the transparency of the underlying bitcoin markets.\textsuperscript{324} BZX also asserts that the Gemini Exchange is uniquely positioned, because of its regulatory status and licensing, to be a venue on which traditional financial institutions will be comfortable transacting in bitcoin, and BZX posits that these financial institutions provide a bridge to the equities markets and other capital markets, improving price discovery, liquidity, and transparency.\textsuperscript{325}

The Overdahl Letter asserts that the approval of the proposed bitcoin ETP would facilitate a cost-effective and convenient means for investors to gain exposure to bitcoin similar to a direct investment in bitcoin, improving portfolio diversification opportunities for investors, and would help make bitcoin markets more transparent.\textsuperscript{326} The Overdahl Letter also argues that a bitcoin ETP will protect current investors in bitcoin by providing regulatory certainty.\textsuperscript{327} The Overdahl Letter predicts that the availability of a bitcoin ETP would help attract professional market makers to the spot market, as well as the market for bitcoin ETPs, and that the presence of these professional market makers would add to the resilience of the spot price on the exchange, improve liquidity and other measures of market quality, and promote trading volume at the exchange.\textsuperscript{328} The Lewis Letter asserts that bitcoin is relatively uncorrelated with other assets, enabling investors to construct more efficient portfolios.\textsuperscript{329} BZX and the Lewis Letter also assert that listing the shares on a national securities exchange and a shift from OTC trading to trading on exchanges would make the overall bitcoin market more transparent.\textsuperscript{330} Similarly, one commenter asserts that listing the Shares and the adoption of best practices, such as IV and NAV dissemination, will enhance the resiliency and efficiency of the market for bitcoin.\textsuperscript{331}

One commenter believes that lack of regulation and consumer protection also increases the chance and incentives for market price manipulation and states that approving the ETP before structural protections and controls are firmly in place would put investors at undue risk.\textsuperscript{332} This commenter asserts that several fundamental flaws make bitcoin a dangerous asset class to force into an exchange-traded structure, including shallow trade volume, extreme hoarding, low liquidity, hyper price volatility, a global web of unregulated bucket-shop exchanges, high bankruptcy risk, and oversized exposure to trading in countries where there is no regulatory oversight.\textsuperscript{333}

2. Discussion

BZX, the Overdahl Letter, and other commenters assert that investment in bitcoin through a ETP would reduce the expense, complexity, and risk of bitcoin exposure.\textsuperscript{334} BZX, the Overdahl Letter, and the Lewis Letter further assert that approval of the Winklevoss Bitcoin Trust would make bitcoin markets more transparent,\textsuperscript{335} and the Overdahl Letter argues that approval of the proposal would protect investors by providing regulatory certainty.\textsuperscript{336} Additionally, the Overdahl Letter and Lewis Letter argue that approval of the proposal would improve the availability of investment and portfolio diversification opportunities for investors.\textsuperscript{337}

The Commission acknowledges that each of these is a potential benefit of a bitcoin ETP. The Commission, however, must consider these potential benefits in the broader context of whether the proposal meets each of the applicable requirements of the Exchange Act. Pursuant to Section 19(b)(2) of the Exchange Act, the Commission must disapprove a proposed rule change filed by a national securities exchange if it does not find that the proposed rule change is consistent with the applicable requirements of the Exchange Act—including the requirement under Section 6(b)(5) that the rules of a national securities exchange be designed to prevent fraudulent and manipulative acts and practices.\textsuperscript{338} Thus, even if a proposed rule change would provide certain benefits to investors and the markets, the proposed rule change may still fail to meet other requirements under the Exchange Act.\textsuperscript{339} For the reasons discussed above, BZX has not met its burden of demonstrating an adequate basis in the record for the Commission to find that the proposal is consistent with

\textsuperscript{318} See Keeler Letter, supra note 35.
\textsuperscript{319} See Bang Letter, supra note 35.
\textsuperscript{320} See Converges Letter, supra note 36, at 2.
\textsuperscript{321} See Virtu Letter, supra note 36, at 2.
\textsuperscript{322} See BZX Letter II, supra note 13, at 8.
\textsuperscript{323} See id. at 3, 8.
\textsuperscript{324} See id. at 17; Petition for Review, supra note 4, at 16; Overdahl Letter, supra note 36, at 13; Virtu Letter, supra note 36, at 2.
\textsuperscript{325} See BZX Letter II, supra note 13, at 20–21.
\textsuperscript{326} See Overdahl Letter, supra note 36, at 13.
\textsuperscript{327} See Overdahl Letter, supra note 36, at 13.
\textsuperscript{328} See Overdahl Letter, supra note 36, at 3, 8.
\textsuperscript{329} See Lewis Letter I, supra note 65, at 11–16.
\textsuperscript{330} See id. at 7. See also Petition for Review, supra note 4, at 16.
\textsuperscript{331} See Virtu Letter, supra note 36, at 2.
\textsuperscript{332} See Williams Letter, supra note 35, at 2–3.
\textsuperscript{333} See id. at 1.
\textsuperscript{334} See Section III.F.1, supra.
\textsuperscript{335} See supra notes 324–326, 330 and accompanying text.
\textsuperscript{336} See supra note 327 and accompanying text.
\textsuperscript{337} See supra notes 326, 329 and accompanying text.
\textsuperscript{339} The Commission also notes that, according to the Trust’s Registration Statement, investors in the Trust would still be subject to some of the risks of holding bitcoin directly. See Registration Statement, supra note 22, at 29 ("Security breaches, ‘cyber attacks,’ computer malware and computer hacking attacks have been a prevalent concern in the Bitcoin Exchange Market since the launch of the Bitcoin Network. Any cyber security breach caused by hacking . . . could harm the Trust’s business operations or result in loss of the Trust’s assets.").
Exchange Act Section 6(b)(5),\textsuperscript{340} and, accordingly, the Commission must disapprove the proposal.

\textbf{G. Additional Factors Supporting Disapproval}

As addressed in detail above, the Commission is disapproving the proposed rule change because BZX has not met its burden to demonstrate that its proposal is consistent with Exchange Act Section 6(b)(5). BZX has neither entered into surveillance-sharing agreements with regulated, bitcoin-related markets of significant size nor demonstrated that alternative means of compliance with Exchange Act Section 6(b)(5) would be sufficient. Because BZX has failed to carry its burden, the proposed rule change must be disapproved.

The Commission also notes several inconsistencies between the BZX’s proposed rule change and the Trust’s Registration Statement that reinforce the need to disapprove BZX’s proposal. For example, in its proposal, BZX points to the following factors that, in its view, weigh in favor of approval. Those factors include “the liquidity of the market in the underlying commodity,” “the trading volume in derivatives based on the underlying commodity,” “listing exchange rules and procedures prohibiting use of material nonpublic information,” and “listing exchange rules regarding trading halts.”\textsuperscript{341} But those factors cannot be reconciled with BZX’s current proposal and thus provide independent confirmation that the proposed rule change must be disapproved.

\textbf{Liquidity of bitcoin markets.} The Trust’s Registration Statement concedes that underlying bitcoin markets are insufficiently liquid to protect against credible threats to those markets’ integrity. The Trust’s Registration Statement, for example, acknowledges that “operational interruption” in large bitcoin exchanges “may limit the liquidity of bitcoin” and “result in volatile prices and a reduction in confidence” and that “[t]rading on a single Bitcoin Exchange may result in less favorable prices and decreased liquidity.”\textsuperscript{342} The Trust’s characterization of the bitcoin markets contrast with, for example, the over-the-counter gold market, which the Commission noted had “unique liquidity and depth.”\textsuperscript{343} This factor accordingly weighs against approval of the proposed rule change.

\textbf{Trading volume in derivatives based on the underlying commodity.} The Trust’s Registration Statement recognizes that bitcoin derivatives markets are nascent and insufficiently developed in regulated marketplaces to serve meaningful purposes such as, for example, providing investors with credible information regarding bitcoin’s future prospects.\textsuperscript{344} As the Trust’s Registration Statement acknowledges, “[a] limited market currently exists for bitcoin-based derivatives.”\textsuperscript{345} As explained above, the market for bitcoin-based derivatives is not yet well developed.\textsuperscript{346} That differs, for example, from platinum and palladium markets, where futures products on those metals had been trading for several decades before commodity-trust ETPs were launched, and where the Commission has noted that exchanges are able to adequately “obtain information regarding trading” in regulated derivatives. This factor accordingly weighs against approval of the proposed rule change.

\textbf{Listing exchange rules and procedures prohibiting use of material nonpublic information.} Regardless of BZX’s rules and procedures regarding insider trading, many underlying bitcoin markets are, at present, opaque.\textsuperscript{347} According to the Trust’s Registration Statement, for example, “[m]any Bitcoin Exchanges do not provide the public with significant information regarding their ownership structure, management teams, corporate practices or regulatory compliance.”\textsuperscript{348} The Trust itself thus recognizes that there is a significant risk that material nonpublic information may be used in a manner that could affect bitcoin’s market price. In turn, any ETP using bitcoin as an underlying asset. This factor weighs against approval of the proposed rule change.

\textbf{Listing exchange rules regarding trading halts.} Regardless of BZX’s rules regarding trading halts, BZX has not explained how it will respond to disruptions in trading in underlying bitcoin markets.\textsuperscript{349} The Trust’s Registration Statement acknowledges the unusual and severe nature of such trading halts in bitcoin, noting that “[e]ven the largest Bitcoin Exchanges have been subject to operational interruption (e.g., the temporary shutdown of Mt. Gox due to distributed denial of service attacks (‘DDoS’) attacks by hackers and/or malware, and its permanent closure in February 2014).”\textsuperscript{350} Moreover, as one commenter noted, the Gemini Auction has failed on at least two occasions.\textsuperscript{351} Such trading halts could result in volatile prices and reduced confidence in any ETP that uses bitcoin as an underlying asset. Accordingly, this factor weighs against approval of the proposed rule change.

\textbf{H. Other Comments}

Comment letters also addressed the following topics:\textsuperscript{352}

\begin{itemize}
  \item The nature and uses of bitcoin;\textsuperscript{353}
  \item the state of development of bitcoin as a digital asset;\textsuperscript{354}
  \item the use of bitcoin for illegal activities;\textsuperscript{355}
  \item the inherent value of, and risks of investing in, bitcoin;\textsuperscript{356}
  \item the cost of electricity required to maintain the Bitcoin network;\textsuperscript{357}
  \item the desire of investors to gain access to bitcoin through an ETP.\textsuperscript{358}
\end{itemize}
• investor understanding about bitcoin;\textsuperscript{359}
• the appropriate measures for the Trust to secure its bitcoin holdings against theft or loss;\textsuperscript{360}
• whether the Trust should insure its bitcoin holdings against theft or loss;\textsuperscript{361}
• the adequacy of the Trust’s procedures for handling potential “forks” in the bitcoin blockchain;\textsuperscript{362}
• the blockchain treatment of positions in the Shares, including short positions or derivative positions;\textsuperscript{363}
• the potential conflicts of interest related to the affiliations among the Sponsor, the Custodian, and the Gemini Exchange;\textsuperscript{364}
• the legitimacy or enhanced regulatory protection that Commission approval of the proposed ETP might confer upon bitcoin as a digital asset;\textsuperscript{365}
and
• the value to the Commission of enhanced oversight over bitcoin markets from approving the proposal.\textsuperscript{366}

Ultimately, however, additional discussion of these tangential topics is unnecessary, as they do not bear on the

basis for the Commission’s decision to disapprove BZX’s proposal.\textsuperscript{367}

I. Basis for Disapproval

As discussed above,\textsuperscript{368} the central factor for the Commission in its current consideration of the BZX proposal is whether it is consistent with Exchange Act Section 6(b)(5), which requires, among other things, that the rules of a national securities exchange be designed to prevent fraudulent and manipulative acts and practices and to promote just and efficient markets.\textsuperscript{369}

Although BZX argues that its proposal can satisfy these requirements because bitcoin markets are inherently difficult to manipulate,\textsuperscript{370} and because alternative means of identifying fraud and manipulation would be sufficient,\textsuperscript{371} the Commission concludes that, as discussed above, BZX has not established that these proffered means of compliance—alone or in combination—are sufficient to meet the requirements of Exchange Act Section 6(b)(5).\textsuperscript{372}

Thus, the Commission believes that BZX must demonstrate with respect to this proposal that—like the listing exchanges for previously approved commodity-trust ETPs—\textsuperscript{373}—it can enter into a surveillance-sharing agreement with a regulated, bitcoin-related market of significant size. As discussed above, however, BZX has not shown that it can enter into such an agreement, because the proposal does not support a conclusion that the markets for bitcoin or derivatives on bitcoin are regulated markets of significant size.\textsuperscript{374} Therefore, BZX has not met its burden to
demonstrate that the proposed rule change is consistent with Exchange Act Section 6(b)(5), and, accordingly, the Commission is disapproving the proposed rule change.\textsuperscript{375}

While the Commission concludes that BZX must demonstrate the ability to enter into a surveillance-sharing agreement with a regulated market of significant size related to bitcoin, and while this factor strongly supports disapproval of BZX’s proposed rule change, the other factors BZX asks the Commission to weigh also support the disapproval of the proposed rule change. Even considering these other factors, the Commission does not find BZX’s proposed rule change to be consistent with Exchange Act Section 6(b)(5)’s requirement that the rules of a national securities exchange be designed “to prevent fraudulent and manipulative acts and practices” and “to protect investors and the public interest.”\textsuperscript{377}

IV. Conclusion

For the reasons set forth above, the Commission does not find, pursuant to Section 19(b)(2) of the Exchange Act,

\textsuperscript{375} In disapproving the proposed rule change, as modified by Amendments No. 1 and 2, the Commission has considered its impact on efficiency, competition, and capital formation. See 15 U.S.C. 78ff(c); see also supra notes 322–326, 329 and accompanying text. According to BZX, the Sponsor believes that the Shares will represent a cost-effective and convenient means of gaining exposure to bitcoin similar to a direct investment in bitcoin, allowing investors to more effectively implement strategic and tactical asset allocation strategies that use bitcoin, with lower cost than that associated with the direct purchase, storage, and safekeeping of bitcoin. See Amendment No. 1, supra note 1, 81 FR at 76662; see also supra notes 322–326, 329. BZX Letter I, supra note 65, at 3, 11–16 (asserting that a bitcoin-based ETP would enable ordinary investors to construct more efficient portfolios). Regarding competition, BZX has asserted that approval of the proposed rule change “will enhance competition among market participants, to the benefit of investors and the marketplace.” Amendment No. 1, supra note 1, 81 FR at 76669. BZX also asserts that the Shares “would facilitate capital formation in the bitcoin marketplace in a manner nearly identical to commodity-trust exchange traded products.” BZX Letter II, supra note 13, at 3, 30. Additionally, one commenter asserts that approval of the Proposal would allow the United States to continue its “historic technological leadership.” Baird Letter, supra note 35, while another commenter asserts that, with the approval of the Proposal, “bitcoin might become a much larger part of the world economy.” Barish Letter III, supra note 35. The Commission recognizes that BZX and commenters assert the economic benefits described above, but, for the reasons discussed throughout, the Commission is disapproving the proposed rule change because it does not find that the proposed rule change is consistent with the Exchange Act.

\textsuperscript{376} See Section II.G., supra.

\textsuperscript{377} 15 U.S.C. 78h(b)(5).
that the proposed rule change, as modified by Amendments No. 1 and 2, is consistent with the requirements of the Exchange Act and the rules and regulations thereunder applicable to a national securities exchange, and in particular, with Section 6(b)(5) of the Exchange Act.

It is therefore ordered, pursuant to Rule 431 of the Commission’s Rules of Practice, that the earlier action taken by delegated authority, Exchange Act Release No. 80206 (Mar. 10, 2017), 82 FR 14076 (Mar. 16, 2017), is set aside and, pursuant to Section 19(b)(2) of the Exchange Act, SR-BatsBZX-2016–30 is disapproved.

By the Commission.

Brent J. Fields,
Secretary.

[FR Doc. 2018–16427 Filed 7–31–18; 8:45 am]
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SMALL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

[License No. 06/06–0346]

Stellus Capital SBIC, L.P.; Notice Seeking Exemption Under Section 312 of the Small Business Investment Act, Conflicts of Interest

Notice is hereby given that Stellus Capital SBIC, L.P., 4400 Post Oak Parkway, Suite 2200, Houston, TX 77027, a Federal Licensee under the Small Business Investment Act of 1958, as amended (“the Act”), in connection with the financing of a small concern, has sought an exemption under Section 312 of the Act and Section 107.730, Financings which constitute Conflicts of Interest of the Small Business Administration (“SBA”) Rules and Regulations (13 CFR 107.730). Ironwood Mezzanine Fund IV–A, L.P. proposes to provide debt and equity financing for the purpose of purchasing a subsidiary (Capewell Intermediate Holding, LLC) from an Associate, Capewell Holding, LLC. Capewell Holding, LLC is an Associate because Ironwood Mezzanine Fund III–A, L.P., an Associate of Mezzanine Fund IV–A, L.P., owns more than ten percent of Capewell Holding, LLC.

The financing is brought within the purview of § 107.730(a)(4) of the Regulations because Stellus Capital SBIC, L.P., seeks to purchase the loan financing to KelleyAmerit Holdings, Inc. from Stellus Capital Investment Corp., an Associate of Stellus Capital SBIC, L.P. Therefore, this transaction is considered discharging an obligation of an Associate, requiring a prior SBA exemption.

Notice is hereby given that any interested person may submit written comments on this transaction within fifteen days of the date of this publication to the Associate Administrator, Office of Investment and Innovation, U.S. Small Business Administration, 409 Third Street SW, Washington, DC 20416.

A. Joseph Shepard,
Associate Administrator for Office of Investment and Innovation.

[FR Doc. 2018–16414 Filed 7–31–18; 8:45 am]
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SMALL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

[License No. 01/01–0435]

Ironwood Mezzanine Fund IV–A, L.P.; Notice Seeking Exemption Under Section 312 of the Small Business Investment Act, Conflicts of Interest

Notice is hereby given that Ironwood Mezzanine Fund IV–A, L.P., 45 Nod Road, Suite 2, Avon, CT 06001, a Federal Licensee under the Small Business Investment Act of 1958, as amended (“the Act”), in connection with a financing of a small concern, has sought an exemption under Section 312 of the Act and Section 107.730, Financings which constitute Conflicts of Interest of the Small Business Administration (“SBA”) Rules and Regulations (13 CFR 107.730). Ironwood Mezzanine Fund IV–A, L.P. proposes to provide debt and equity financing for the purpose of purchasing a subsidiary (Capewell Intermediate Holding, LLC) from an Associate, Capewell Holding, LLC. Capewell Holding, LLC is an Associate because Ironwood Mezzanine Fund III–A, L.P., an Associate of Mezzanine Fund IV–A, L.P., owns more than ten percent of Capewell Holding, LLC.

The financing is brought within the purview of § 107.730(a)(4) of the Regulations because proceeds from the transaction will directly benefit Associates Ironwood Mezzanine Fund III, L.P. and Ironwood Mezzanine Fund III–A, L.P.

Notice is hereby given that any interested person may submit written comments on this transaction within fifteen days of the date of this publication to the Associate Administrator, Office of Investment and Innovation, U.S. Small Business Administration, 409 Third Street SW, Washington, DC 20416.

A. Joseph Shepard,
Associate Administrator, Office of Investment and Innovation.

[FR Doc. 2018–16415 Filed 7–31–18; 8:45 am]
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SURFACE TRANSPORTATION BOARD

[Docket No. FD 36208]

Progressive Rail Incorporated—Continuance in Control Exemption—St. Paul & Pacific Railroad Company, LLC

Progressive Rail Incorporated (PGR), a Class III rail carrier, has filed a verified notice of exemption under 49 CFR 1180.2(d)(2) to continue in control of St. Paul & Pacific Railroad Company, LLC (SPR), upon SPR’s becoming a Class III rail carrier.

This transaction is related to a concurrently filed verified notice of exemption in St. Paul & Pacific Railroad Company, LLC—Change in Operator Exemption—Santa Cruz and Monterey Bay Railway Company, Docket No. FD 36207. In that proceeding, SPR seeks an exemption under 49 CFR 1150.31 to assume operations over approximately 31 miles of rail line (the Line) owned by the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission extending from milepost 0.433 at Watsonville Junction to milepost 31.39 at Davenport, Cal.

The earliest this transaction may be consummated is August 15, 2018, the effective date of the exemption (30 days after the verified notice was filed). PGR states that it intends to consummate the transaction on August 16, 2018.

PGR will continue in control of SPR upon SPR’s becoming a Class III rail carrier and remains in control of Class III carriers Airlake Terminal Railway Company, LLC, Central Midland Railway Company, Iowa Traction Railway Company, Iowa Southern Railway Company, Piedmont & Northern Railroad Company, and Chicago Junction Railway Company.

PGR states that: (1) The rail line to be operated by SPR does not connect with any other railroads in the PGR corporate family; (2) the continuance in control is not part of a series of anticipated transactions that would connect this line with any other railroad in the PGR corporate family; and (3) the transaction does not involve a Class I rail carrier.

Therefore, the transaction is exempt from the prior approval requirements of 49 U.S.C. 11323. See 49 CFR 1180.2(d)(2).

Under 49 U.S.C. 10502(g), the Board may not use its exemption authority to relieve a rail carrier of its statutory obligation to protect the interests of its employees. Section 11326(c), however, does not provide for labor protection for transactions under §§11324 and 11325 that involve only Class III rail carriers. Accordingly, the Board may not impose labor protective conditions here because...