

## SEC and CFTC Issue Interpretive Framework on Digital Assets

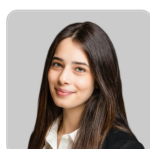
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On March 17, 2026, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission and Commodity Futures Trading Commission issued a joint interpretive release clarifying the application of the federal securities laws to digital assets.<sup>[1]</sup>

The agencies state that the interpretation is intended to (i) provide a “coherent” taxonomy of crypto assets, (ii) explain how a non-security crypto asset may become subject to, and cease to be subject to, an investment contract, and (iii) clarify the treatment of protocol mining, staking, wrapping, and airdrops.

SEC Chair Paul S. Atkins emphasized that the guidance is intended to “draw clear lines in clear terms,” while acknowledging that “most crypto assets are not themselves securities” and that investment contract analyses may evolve over time. CFTC Chair Michael S. Selig similarly characterized the release as establishing “clear and rational rules of the road” and a “workable, harmonized” regulatory framework.<sup>[2]</sup>

### I. A Functional Taxonomy of Digital Assets

The release introduces a framework distinguishing among categories of digital assets based on their economic function. The SEC identifies several categories of digital assets that, in isolation, generally do not constitute securities:

- “*Digital Commodities* – NOT Securities – These are crypto assets that are intrinsically linked to and derive their value from how crypto systems function, as well as supply and demand dynamics, rather than from the expectation of profits from the essential managerial efforts of others.” These assets typically do not convey rights to income, profits, or assets of a business enterprise, and instead function as integral components of decentralized networks (e.g., facilitating validation, governance, or transaction execution). The release identifies examples including Bitcoin, Ether, and Dogecoin, which operate on decentralized systems and are not dependent on a central promoter for value creation.
- “*Digital Collectibles* – NOT Securities – These are crypto assets that are designed to be collected and/or used and may represent or convey rights to artwork, music, videos, trading cards, in-game items, or digital representations or references to internet memes, characters, current events, or trends, among other things.” However, a digital collectible may be treated as a security where it is offered or marketed with an expectation of profit or where purchasers are led to rely on the ongoing managerial or entrepreneurial efforts of others (e.g., where value depends on a promoter developing, enhancing, or supporting the asset).
- “*Digital Tools* – NOT Securities – These are crypto assets that perform a practical function, such as providing proof of a membership, or acting as a ticket, credential, title instrument, or identity badge.”
- “*Stablecoins*<sup>[3]</sup> – GENIUS Act Stablecoins NOT Securities – Defined in the GENIUS Act as ‘payment stablecoin issued by a permitted payment stablecoin issuer.’<sup>[4][5]</sup> A payment stablecoin is a digital asset that is used for payment or settlement and whose issuer is obligated to convert, redeem, or repurchase the asset for a fixed amount

of monetary value, thereby maintaining a stable value relative to that reference asset. The GENIUS Act further provides that a “payment stablecoin issued by a permitted payment stablecoin issuer” is not a security.

A permitted payment stablecoin issuer is a U.S.-formed entity, including certain bank-affiliated or regulated entities, that is authorized under federal or state regimes to issue such instruments, although it is possible for foreign companies to be approved as foreign payment stablecoin issuers. All such issuers are subject to specific statutory constraints, including a prohibition on paying interest or yield to holders solely in connection with holding or using the stablecoin. Stablecoins that fall within this statutory framework are categorically excluded from the definition of a security. However, there are other types of digital assets that presently describe themselves as stablecoins, and unless the issuers of such stablecoins become permitted issuers, then the GENIUS Act provides that they may no longer be characterized as stablecoins. At such time, those stablecoins would most appropriately be analyzed under the federal securities laws, depending on their characteristics and use.

The agencies did reaffirm that tokenized traditional financial instruments constitute securities:

- “*Digital Securities* (or ‘tokenized securities’) – Securities – Financial instruments enumerated in the definition of ‘security’ that is formatted as or represented by a crypto asset, where the record of ownership is maintained in whole or in part on or through one or more crypto networks.”<sup>[6]</sup>

### III. Asset Classification Provides Direction, Not Certainty

The SEC emphasizes that this taxonomy is descriptive, not determinative. While the categories provide a useful way to understand how digital assets function, they do not resolve whether a particular transaction involves a security.

Instead, the classification serves as an analytical starting point for applying the securities laws. The ultimate determination continues to depend on the surrounding facts and circumstances—particularly whether the transaction introduces elements of an investment contract.

As a result, an asset that falls within a “non-security” category in isolation may nonetheless be treated as a security where it is offered, marketed, or supported in a manner that creates a reasonable expectation of profits based on the efforts of others.

### III. The Agencies Are Focused on What Issuers and Platforms Do

The SEC reiterates that the analysis turns on whether a transaction involves an “investment contract” under *SEC v. W.J. Howey Co.*<sup>[7]</sup>, and emphasizes that how an issuer markets and promotes a crypto asset is central to that determination.

- a. Inducement and Managerial Efforts Establish the Investment Contract.** The Commission explains how a non-security crypto asset becomes subject to an investment contract. It states that this occurs where an issuer “induces an investment of money in a common enterprise” through “representations or promises” that it will undertake “essential managerial efforts” from which purchasers would reasonably expect to derive profits. The focus is on inducement and reliance: whether the issuer is positioning itself as central to value creation, development, or maintenance of the network or asset. This includes situations where the issuer undertakes to build out functionality, support secondary markets, enhance token value, or otherwise drive adoption in a manner that creates a reasonable expectation of profit.
- b. Source, Medium, and Content of Representations Control the Analysis.** The Commission provides more granular guidance on the nature of the “representations or promises” that can give rise to an investment contract. It emphasizes that the analysis depends on (i) the source of the statements (e.g., core development team, affiliated entities, or other promoters), (ii) the medium through which they are communicated (including white papers, websites, social media, and ongoing public communications), and (iii) the level of detail and specificity regarding future efforts and expected outcomes. The release makes clear that both pre-launch and post-launch statements are relevant, and that ongoing communications reinforcing reliance on a central team can sustain an investment contract even after initial distribution.
- c. Termination of the Investment Contract Depends on Dissipation of Reliance.** The Commission also addresses when a crypto asset ceases to be subject to an investment contract. It explains that the investment contract may terminate where the issuer has “fulfilled its representations or promises” or where it has “failed to satisfy” them, such that purchasers can no longer reasonably rely on the issuer’s efforts. This reflects the view that the securities law analysis is not static, but evolves with the facts. At the same time, the Commission does

not define when reliance has sufficiently dissipated, leaving the determination dependent on whether, in practice, a core group continues to play an essential role in the asset's value or operation.

Taken together, these points operationalize *Howey* in the digital asset context. The Commission is not changing the test, but is expanding how it will be applied. [8] For market participants, the implication is that both initial structuring and ongoing conduct must be managed carefully, as the same asset can move into, and remain within, the securities laws based on how it is presented and supported over time.

#### IV. Further Agency Clarifications

The Commission states that “protocol mining,” “protocol staking,” and the “wrapping” of a non-security crypto asset “do not involve the offer and sale of a security,” and that certain “airdrops” do not involve an “investment of money” under *Howey*.

The SEC states that “payment stablecoins issued by a permitted payment stablecoin issuer” are not securities, focusing on instruments designed to maintain a stable value and function as payment mechanisms.

#### V. What the Agencies Leave Open, Potential Problems

The release does not define when a token definitively transitions out of securities status, nor does it address how broker-dealer, exchange, or ATS frameworks apply to digital asset platforms.

The framework does not displace the case-by-case application of *Howey*, and outcomes will continue to turn on specific facts and conduct. In practice, this means that two tokens with identical features may be treated differently depending on how they are offered, marketed, and supported. The agencies are making clear that classification alone is not determinative; rather, the presence or absence of representations, the role of a central team, and the structure of the surrounding transaction will drive the analysis.

While the release describes a coordinated approach in which the SEC regulates digital securities and the CFTC regulates digital commodities, it does not resolve how existing regulatory frameworks apply. Platforms operating across asset types will still need to navigate multiple regimes.

The framework may also face limitations post-*Chevron*, as courts are no longer required to defer to the SEC's interpretation of ambiguous statutory terms. [9] This raises the possibility of divergence between the Commission's approach and judicial outcomes, particularly given the release's reliance on flexible, fact-dependent standards and its attempt to draw distinctions (such as the “lifecycle” concept) that are not expressly grounded in the statutory text.

#### VI. Industry Takeaways

The central message is that most tokens are not securities in isolation, but that representations, structure, and ongoing involvement determine whether the securities laws apply.

For market participants, the implication is that compliance must be built into product design, communications, and operations from the outset. The framework creates room to structure outside the securities laws, but it does not reduce the importance of execution or the risk of recharacterization.

The SEC has requested public comment on the interpretive release.

[1] *Securities and Exchange Commission, Application of the Federal Securities Laws to Certain Types of Crypto Assets and Certain Transactions Involving Crypto Assets*, Securities Act Release No. 33-11412, Exchange Act Release No. 34-105020 (Mar. 17, 2026), <https://www.sec.gov/files/rules/interp/2026/33-11412.pdf>.

[2] Press Release, U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, *SEC Clarifies the Application of Federal Securities Laws to Crypto Assets*, No. 2026-30 (Mar. 17, 2026), <https://www.sec.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2026-30-sec-clarifies-application-federal-securities-laws-crypto-assets>.

[3] Stablecoins are crypto assets designed to maintain a stable value relative to a reference asset, typically a fiat currency such as the U.S. dollar. They are commonly used as a means of payment, settlement, or value storage within crypto markets. Stablecoins generally seek to maintain this stability through mechanisms such as asset-backed reserves (e.g., cash or U.S. Treasury holdings) or other stabilization frameworks, and are typically structured to be redeemable at or near par value. The GENIUS Act defines a subset of these instruments, “payment stablecoins issued by a permitted payment stablecoin issuer,” which the release treats as not constituting securities.

[4] U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, *Application of the Federal Securities Laws to Certain Types of Crypto Assets and Certain Transactions Involving Crypto Assets* (Fact Sheet, Mar. 17, 2026), <https://www.sec.gov/files/33-11412-fact-sheet.pdf>.

[5] Guiding and Establishing National Innovation for U.S. Stablecoins Act, Pub. L. No. 119-27, 139 Stat. \_\_\_\_ (2025); see also Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft LLP, *Operation and Structure of the GENIUS Act of 2025 on Payment Stablecoins* (June 24, 2025), <https://www.cadwalader.com/resources/clients-friends-memos/operation-and-structure-of-the-genius-act-of-2025-on-payment-stablecoins>.

[6] *Id.*

[7] *SEC v. W.J. Howey Co.*, 328 U.S. 293 (1946) (“*Howey*”). The *Howey* test defines an investment contract as a contract, transaction, or scheme involving (1) an investment of money, (2) in a common enterprise, (3) with an expectation of profits derived from the efforts of others.

[8] The interpretation does not replace *Howey*, but instead conveys the SEC’s views, based on extensive public input, on how certain aspects of the *Howey* investment contract test apply to crypto assets and transactions, and represents the SEC’s first step toward developing a clearer regulatory framework for the treatment of crypto assets under the federal securities laws.

[9] *Chevron U.S.A. Inc. v. Natural Resources Defense Council, Inc.*, 467 U.S. 837 (1984). The Court established a two-step framework under which courts first determine whether Congress has spoken directly to the precise question at issue and, if not, defer to an agency’s reasonable interpretation of an ambiguous statute. That framework was later abrogated by *Loper Bright Enterprises v. Raimondo*, which held that courts must exercise independent judgment in interpreting statutes and are no longer required to defer to agency interpretations.