

US Department of Defense

US closed airspace over El Paso due to military laser, source says

Claim that a directed-energy weapon was used without approval follows assertion of drone activity from Mexican cartels



Security personnel outside El Paso International Airport on Wednesday after authorities lifted their temporary closure of the airspace over the Texan city © Jose Luis Gonzalez/Reuters

Steff Chávez in Washington and **Jude Webber** in Dublin

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US airspace above the Texas border city of El Paso was temporarily closed after federal officials used a military laser without informing the civil aviation regulator, according to a person familiar with the matter.

Customs and Border Protection on Wednesday used a high-energy anti-drone laser near the Fort Bliss US Army base, adjacent to the El Paso International Airport, without warning the Federal Aviation Administration, the person said.

Earlier on Wednesday the administration had said the airspace was temporarily closed after it took military action against what it claimed were Mexican cartel drones that crossed into American airspace.

But US lawmakers questioned the administration's account as tensions between the defence department, the homeland security department and the FAA emerged.

The Pentagon has been testing high-energy lasers for use against drones operated by drug cartels in the region, and had transferred one of these systems to CBP, according to the person familiar. CBP is a federal law enforcement agency that is part of the Department of Homeland Security.

Defence department and FAA officials were scheduled to meet on February 20 to discuss safety measures for the laser, but the Pentagon opted to mobilise it sooner, leading the aviation agency to restrict the airspace until officials could gather, the person added.

But the Trump administration insisted that the airspace was closed due to Mexican cartel drone incursions.

"Mexican cartel drones breached US airspace," said an administration official on Wednesday. The Pentagon "took action to disable the drones".

The FAA and defence department "have determined there is no threat to commercial travel", the official added.

US transportation secretary Sean Duffy, whose department oversees the FAA, wrote on X that the aviation agency and Pentagon "acted swiftly to address a cartel drone incursion".

Veronica Escobar, who represents El Paso in the US House of Representatives, posted on X on Wednesday evening that the airspace closure was "the result of incompetence at the highest levels of the administration".

Earlier in the day she had rejected the Trump administration's explanation, saying it "does not add up" and that it was not the information shared with Congress.

She added that the airspace closure did not appear politically motivated.

Drone incursions from Mexico are “not unusual” and “there was nothing extraordinary . . . in any drone incursion into the US that I’m aware of,” Escobar told reporters in Washington.

There were almost 10,000 drone incursions at the US-Mexican border in 2025, according to the person familiar with the matter.

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said “we have no information of the use of drones on the border”.

She added that if the US had any indication that drones had crossed into US airspace, “they can ask the Mexican government”.

“We must not speculate” about what happened, she said.

Democratic Senator Tammy Duckworth, a former army pilot, told the Associated Press that she was “hearing” that it was “a CBP and [Department of Defense] laser-based counter-drone test that was not co-ordinated prior to them conducting the test with the FAA. So I have all sorts of questions.”

Republican Senator Ted Cruz, who represents Texas, said that he was working to “gather more information” about the airspace closure.

Jack Reed, the top Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said in a statement that there were “conflicting accounts coming from different parts of the federal government” and called on the Pentagon and FAA to “reconcile these discrepancies”.

The US abruptly closed the airspace around El Paso International Airport late on Tuesday night for 10 days citing “special security reasons”, with the FAA classifying the area as “national defence airspace”. The FAA reopened the airspace on Wednesday morning.

A 10-day airspace closure would have been the longest since September 11 2001.

The closure brought to a halt all flights in and out of the airport. Airspace was also closed around neighbouring Santa Teresa, New Mexico. It has yet to reopen.

Escobar said she knew why the Santa Teresa restrictions remained in place, but was not able to provide details.

Mexican airspace was excluded from the FAA's restrictions.

El Paso is the 23rd most populous US city, with nearly 700,000 inhabitants, and borders the Mexican city of Ciudad Juárez, with which it shares strong economic and cultural ties.

The Pentagon said it had nothing more to share about the incident or the military action taken against the drones. Fort Bliss did not respond to a request for comment. DHS did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Asked whether the FAA's decision was related to anti-drone technology at Fort Bliss, Escobar said "there was nothing happening" at the base that would have necessitated the closure of airspace.

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