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## TRANSPORTATION

# El Paso airspace reopened after FAA quickly rescinds 10-day flight restrictions

A source told the Tribune that Defense Department drones spurred the announced closure, but the White House said unmanned craft were flown by Mexican cartels.

BY [TERRI LANGFORD](#) AND [GABBY BIRENBAUM](#)

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A satellite image of El Paso International Airport, in El Paso, in this handout picture taken on February 6, 2026. The U.S. halted all flights to and from the airport on Feb. 10 for "special security reasons," according to the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration. Planet Labs PBC/Handout via REUTERS.



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The Federal Aviation Administration reopened airspace over El Paso and part of southern New Mexico on Wednesday morning after shutting it down for a few hours overnight amid an announcement there would be no flights for 10 days. The White House now says the unusual closure was triggered by Mexican cartel drones breaching U.S. airspace — contradicting an industry source who said it was because of an impasse with the Department of Defense over the use of unmanned military aircraft.

“The temporary closure of airspace over El Paso has been lifted. There is no threat to commercial aviation. All flights will resume as normal,” the FAA shared on X.

An industry official, who had been briefed on the matter by the FAA in a morning call and asked not to be identified, told the Tribune that the Defense Department has been operating unmanned aircraft, or drones, against drug cartel operations from a base near El Paso’s airport without sharing information with the FAA.

“It has to do with the FAA’s inability to predict where [unmanned aircraft systems] might be flying,” the official told the Tribune. “They have been operating outside the normal flight paths.”

But a Trump official on Wednesday said the closure occurred because Mexican cartel drones breached U.S. airspace. The Department of War took action to disable the drones, the official said, and both the FAA and the military have now determined there is no threat to commercial travel.

“The FAA and DOW acted swiftly to address a cartel drone incursion,” Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy posted on X, referring to the Department of War. “The threat has been neutralized, and there is no danger to commercial travel in the region.”

U.S. Rep. Veronica Escobar, D-El Paso, cast doubt on the administration’s explanation.

“The statement by the administration that this shutdown was linked to a Mexican cartel drone that came into US airspace — that is not my understanding,” Escobar said at a Wednesday morning press conference.

Escobar said the shutdown decision was made by the FAA in Washington, and that neither she, local officials in El Paso nor El Paso International Airport were notified by the agency. Escobar said she found out about the closure late Tuesday night from a member of the federal workforce.

While she would not comment on whether or not drone activity factored into the closure, she noted that drone incursions are not unusual and have occurred for years. She said the FAA owes the public an explanation for the abrupt closure and reopening.

“The information coming from the administration does not add up, and it’s not the information that I was able to gather overnight and this morning,” she said.

The unexplained notices late Tuesday closed airspace over El Paso and a large patch of southern New Mexico west of Santa Teresa for 10 days. El Paso International Airport was set to be closed to all flights, the city had said. The orders closed off all air travel in the affected area, which could cause massive disruption in the nation’s 23rd-largest city.

Escobar said there was not a threat to El Paso, which is why the restriction was lifted so quickly.

A Southwest Airlines spokesperson said the airline resumed operations to and from the airport after the FAA lifted restrictions and customers should confirm their flight’s status before flying.

The Tribune was unable to immediately reach Fort Bliss officials for comment.

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