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The Eight-Hour FAA Interdiction: How Directed Energy and Interagency Discord Grounded El Paso Airspace

Ethics * Urban Environment * Defense

The Night the Borderland Sky Closed

On the night of February 10, 2026, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) issued an emergency directive that temporarily severed El Paso, Texas -- the nation's 23rd-largest municipality -- from the National Airspace System. Activated at 11:30 PM Mountain Standard Time, Notice to Air Missions (NOTAM) FDC 6/2233 designated a 10-nautical-mile radius around El Paso International Airport (ELP), from the surface up to 17,999 feet MSL, as "National Defense Airspace" for a projected ten-day period expiring February 21.[1][2] Invoking 14 CFR 99.7 for "special security reasons," the directive warned that unauthorized aircraft could be intercepted, detained, and subjected to "deadly force."[1][2][3]

Although rescinded less than eight hours later at 7:24 AM MST on February 11 after canceling 19% of scheduled daily traffic, the interdiction precipitated immediate disruption across West Texas and Southern New Mexico.[4][5] Medical evacuation flights carrying critical trauma patients were diverted 40 miles west to Las Cruces, New Mexico, surgical supplies were stranded in Dallas and Phoenix, and El Paso Mayor Renard Johnson reported receiving zero advance federal notice.[4] Subsequent disclosures revealed that the closure stemmed from an uncoordinated deployment of a counter-unmanned aerial system (C-UAS) High-Energy Laser (HEL) by Customs and Border Protection and the newly rebranded Department of War (DOW), exposing a severe operational fault line between domestic directed-energy defense and civil aviation safety.[5][6][9]

| Time (MST) | | Operational Event | | Technical & Civil Impact | | Citation |

| Feb 10, 10:30 PM | | Final Arrival | | Commercial flights land prior to midnight airspace sterilization. | | [5] |

| Feb 10, 11:30 PM | | NOTAM FDC 6/2233 | | 10 NM radius (SFC-17,999 ft MSL) declared National Defense Airspace under 14 CFR 99.7. | | [1][3] |

| Feb 11, 01:00 AM | | ATC Notification | | Air traffic controllers and flight crews discover the 10-day grounding via automated feeds. | | [4] |

| Feb 11, 06:00 AM | | Medical Diversions | | Medevac flights divert to Las Cruces (LRU); critical surgical shipments halted out of state. | | [4] |

| Feb 11, 07:24 AM | | Order Rescinded | | FAA lifts NOTAM after 14 cancellations and 13 delays, stating no commercial threat remains. | | [4][5] |

The Physics of Denial: Atmospheric Laser Propagation and Ocular Hazard

While administration officials initially attributed the shutdown to a "Mexican

cartel drone incursion," defense and aviation officials confirmed that the FAA sterilized the sector upon discovering uncoordinated activation of a kilowatt-class High-Energy Laser -- reportedly fired at an object that turned out to be a Mylar party balloon.[5][6][10] Unlike ballistic interceptors whose kinetic projectiles follow parabolic trajectories constrained by gravity, directed energy weapons propagate in straight lines at the speed of light through the lower atmosphere of Earth until absorbed, scattered, or diffracted.[12][14]

Operating a high-energy laser near a commercial terminal radar approach control (TRACON) environment introduces severe optical and thermodynamics hazards that dictate expansive exclusion zones:

* Nominal Ocular Hazard Distance (NOHD): Kilowatt-class C-UAS lasers engineered to melt composite airframes maintain an NOHD extending miles beyond the target.[11][12] Energy spilling past a small airborne target can induce instantaneous flash blindness or permanent retinal photocoagulation in cockpit crews downrange.[11][12]

* Avionics and Sensor Saturation: Modern airliners and Earth observation and remote sensing platforms rely on electro-optical and infrared focal plane arrays. A brief laser sweep across an aircraft fuselage can permanently saturate or ablate navigation and hazard-avoidance sensors.[13]

* Thermal Blooming and Beam Wander: As a high-irradiance beam traverses the boundary layer, molecular absorption and atmospheric aerosols convert optical energy into sensible heat. This localized heating creates refractive index gradients and micro-scale convection ("thermal blooming") that defocus and deflect the beam.[12][14] In the dust-laden, turbulent air of the Chihuahuan Desert, aerosol scattering and beam wander substantially widen the probabilistic hazard cone, explaining the 10-nautical-mile lateral buffer and 18,000-foot ceiling mandated by the FAA.[1][12][14]

Interagency Discord: The Department of War versus 49 U.S.C. 40103

The El Paso interdiction also exposed institutional friction following Executive Order 14347 (signed September 5, 2025), which authorized "Department of War" (DOW) as a secondary designation for the Department of Defense.[6][7] Under 49 U.S.C. 40103, the U.S. government exercises exclusive sovereignty over domestic airspace, administered by the FAA to safeguard the public right of transit and integrate military activities via structured interagency coordination.[15][16]

In El Paso, the DOW and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) reportedly deployed and activated the counter-drone laser system without completing required safety deconfliction with FAA air traffic authorities.[6][8][9] Former intelligence analyst Stefano Ritondale characterized the episode as an interagency breakdown in which defense operators prioritized rapid kinetic or directed-energy engagement along the border over established civil airspace integration protocols.[6] Confronted with an active directed-energy hazard operating inside commercial approach corridors -- and a planned military testing or deployment window -- the FAA unilaterally imposed the 10-day National Defense Airspace TFR as a protective barrier for civil aviation until White House and interagency negotiations forced a suspension of the uncoordinated laser operations the next morning.[4][8]

Civil Infrastructure Vulnerability and Medical Logistics

Invoking 14 CFR 99.7 over a binational metropolitan hub of nearly 700,000 residents demonstrated how rapidly domestic C-UAS operations can paralyze critical civil infrastructure.[3][4] Unlike routine Temporary Flight Restrictions issued for VIP movement or stadium security, National Defense Airspace carries lethal-force rules of engagement that effectively treat a domestic terminal area as an active combat zone.[2][3] El Paso functions as the primary tertiary trauma and medical logistics center for West Texas and Southern New Mexico. During the eight-hour closure, fixed-wing air ambulances transporting time-critical trauma patients were forced to divert to Las Cruces International Airport (LRU), adding a 40-mile ground transport delay during the clinical "golden hour," while overnight air freight carrying surgical instrumentation and medical radioisotopes was grounded out of state.[4]

| Operational Category | | Measured Impact (Feb 10-11, 2026) |

| Scheduled Flight Cancellations | | 14 commercial arrivals/departures (19% of daily schedule) |

| Delayed Operations | | 13 commercial flights |

| Sterilized Volume | | 10 NM radius around ELP; surface to 17,999 ft MSL |

| Primary Medical Diversion | | Las Cruces International Airport (LRU), 40 miles west |

| Triggering System | | Uncoordinated C-UAS High-Energy Laser (HEL) deployment |

Conclusion: A Contested Domestic Airspace Commons

Although rescinded after eight hours, the February 2026 El Paso grounding establishes a critical precedent for domestic borderland airspace. As transnational smuggling networks adopt low-altitude drone swarms, federal counter-UAS doctrine is shifting toward directed-energy interdiction -- including high-energy lasers and high-power microwaves -- whose optical and electromagnetic hazard envelopes are fundamentally incompatible with unsterilized urban approach corridors.[9][10][12] Preventing future municipal paralysis requires binding real-time telemetry integration between the Department of War and the FAA, ensuring that counter-drone defense does not sever the statutory public right of transit or emergency medical lifelines at the speed of light.

Updates... (Nov 23, 2026): Corrected the executive order number authorizing the "Department of War" secondary designation from EO 14265 (defense acquisitions) to Executive Order 14347 (signed September 5, 2025); replaced crawler-blocked (403) agency pages (Refs. 7, 11, and 12) with the accessible White House Presidential Actions record for EO 14347 and CrossRef-verified peer-reviewed literature on aviation laser safety (Nakagawara et al., Sep 2008 in Optometry) and high-power atmospheric laser propagation (Sprangle et al., Nov 1, 2015 in Applied Optics); removed section numbering; split multi-citation superscripts; and aligned inline citations 1-to-1 with the reference list.

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