

DEFENSE

The UFO briefings on Capitol Hill have begun. Lawmakers aren't impressed.

Agencies need to "take this issue much more seriously," one aide said.



In an image from video provided by the Defense Department from 2015, an unexplained object is seen at center as it is tracked as it soars high along the clouds, traveling against the wind. | Department of Defense via AP

By **BRYAN BENDER**
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Lawmakers receiving the latest secret briefings on UFOs say national security agencies still aren't taking seriously the reports of highly advanced aircraft of unknown origin violating protected airspace.

Members of the Senate Intelligence and Armed Services committees received classified progress reports in recent weeks on a series of new data collection efforts the Pentagon and spy agencies are now required to pursue to more rigorously investigate reports of UFOs, three people with direct knowledge confirmed.

But some leading sponsors of recent legislation want more analysts and surveillance systems dedicated to determining the aircrafts' origin — and not just more reports of their existence

One of those lawmakers is Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.), a member of both committees who [has called the phenomena “an urgent issue”](#) and for the first time is expressing her public dissatisfaction at the response.

“Senator Gillibrand believes that the DoD needs to take this issue much more seriously and get in motion,” said one of her aides, who requested anonymity in order to discuss private conversations. “They have had ample time to implement these important provisions, and they need to show us that they are prepared to address this issue in the long-term.”



Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) speaks during a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing Sept. 28, 2021, on Capitol Hill. | Sarahbeth Maney-Pool/Getty Images

The congressional briefings come four months after Congress passed the National Defense Authorization Act requiring the Pentagon to create the Anomaly Surveillance and Resolution Office.

The office, which is supposed to be fully operational by June, was granted the authority to pursue “any resource, capability, asset, or process” to investigate “unidentified aerial phenomena” — the now-widely accepted nomenclature for UFOs.

The Pentagon office is supposed to be developing an “intelligence collection and analysis plan to gain as much knowledge as possible regarding the technical and operational characteristics, origins, and intentions of unidentified aerial phenomena,” according to the legislation.

That means identifying people across the government “to respond rapidly to incidents or patterns of observations.”

The bill, signed into law by President Joe Biden, also required an annual report and semiannual briefings for Congress, including descriptions of all UAP incidents such as those “associated with military nuclear assets, including strategic nuclear weapons and nuclear-powered ships and submarines.”

To respond to Congress’s direction, Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks [directed the creation](#) of an Airborne Object Identification and Management Synchronization Group to oversee the stepped-up effort and establish the permanent UFO office required by Congress.

Among its tasks is to standardize UAP incident reporting across the military and collect and analyze more intelligence.

“The Department continues to brief Congress on our efforts regarding unidentified aerial phenomena, including our progress in standing up the Airborne Object Identification and Management Synchronization Group, in accordance with the fiscal 2022 National Defense Authorization Act,” Susan Gough, a department spokesperson, told POLITICO in a statement.

“I cannot comment on specific engagements,” she added.



Expanding investigations of UAPs will require dedicating far more resources and personnel to the task, military and intelligence experts say.

But some members of Congress and their staff are beginning to air their dissatisfaction with the progress in making that happen.

Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, the top Republican on the intelligence panel, also believes the Pentagon is not aggressively carrying out Congress' direction.

“Rubio is definitely frustrated,” said one of the senator’s aides, who was not authorized to speak publicly. “They are not moving fast enough, not doing enough, not sharing enough.”

“The administration is aware of the concerns,” he added. “It is not at the level it needs to be.”

Others are more critical, accusing the Pentagon of hiding information from Congress.

“I don’t trust the Department of Defense to get this right since leadership there has always been part of a cover-up,” said Rep. Tim Burchett (R-Tenn.), a member of the

House Transportation Aviation Subcommittee.

“It is clear from the public evidence that we don’t have full control of our airspace,” added Burchett, whose district includes Oak Ridge National Laboratory, [where there have been numerous reports](#) of UFO sightings over the decades. “That’s a national security issue and it’s also unacceptable.”

Five current and former military and intelligence officials and contractor personnel privy to the deliberations who were not authorized to speak publicly told POLITICO they believe real progress is being made to compel agencies to take a more proactive approach — and also be more transparent about what they might know about UFO sightings and technologies.



THE FRIDAY COVER

How Harry Reid, a Terrorist Interrogator and the Singer From Blink-182 Took UFOs Mainstream

BY BRYAN BENDER

Capitol Hill scrutiny has intensified since 2017, when former Pentagon official Luis Elizondo [went public with his concerns](#). Since then, Navy pilots have come forward with credible testimony of UFO encounters, and the Pentagon began [releasing select footage](#) depicting mysterious aircraft captured by fighter jet cameras and ship radars.

“They are putting time in, they are doing work,” said a government contractor who has been enlisted in the new effort. “They are going to put some bodies on it. I think they’ll probably file the reports back to Congress on time. And that is a big plus.”

Others said that while officials are doing a better job of collecting reports of UAPs, they are still reluctant to dedicate more intelligence assets to determine whether some of the reported craft might belong to a foreign nation or if they are extraterrestrial in nature.

“I have seen everything we have [in the files] and I am very confident they are not ours,” said a former senior intelligence official who had authority over the UFO

portfolio, referring to classified U.S. aircraft programs

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The continued uncertainty is prompting members of Congress to increase pressure on the Pentagon and spy agencies to do much more than merely collect UAP reports.

The contractor worries that the new Pentagon panel “is going to receive reports and collate them but they’re not going to lead any organized, serious effort to find out what the hell’s going on, nor are they going to be in a position to press anybody else to do that.”

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Congress wants “somebody to get on the stick over there and get to the bottom of it,” the contractor added.

That also means determining where the sightings are most commonly being reported and then cueing technical systems to monitor those areas more regularly — for example, to “have these three satellites collect X amount of hours in X locations.”

“Who’s got all the puzzle pieces, who’s doing serious analysis, and then making informed, intelligent decisions about [intelligence] collection?” he asked.

But it also means “you have to compete with a lot of other priority things that are going to often outrank this,” he added.

Elizondo also said in an interview that he believes an enduring problem is that there are still “pockets of information” on UAPs within the government that are not being shared with the new Pentagon oversight body or Congress.

And when some of those pockets reach oversight committees through other channels, it further undermines their confidence in the government’s ability to seek and provide

comprehensive answers.

“When they are made aware of information and data and videos and photos that are not being provided by DoD, it sets up a situation where the left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing,” Elizondo said.

Gough, the Pentagon spokesperson, declined to respond to such criticism.

Elizondo also warned that the Pentagon is lumping the most mystifying UAP reports with more traditional drones or other more readily identifiable objects commonly discovered in U.S. airspace, such as weather balloons or discarded rocket and satellite components.

The intent of the new law “is not to associate UAPs as an air clutter issue or space junk,” Elizondo said. “That should not be confused with clearly breakaway technologies that are being employed and demonstrated within our controlled U.S. airspace.”

The government UFO contractor sees signs of momentum to give “the phenomenon” the attention it deserves, but expects Congress will have to take more legislative action.

“I think there are pockets of people in different agencies who are enthusiastic,” he said. “But is it a focused effort? Is there somebody at a high level who is an advocate who owns this problem and is putting together a plan to get the answers that Congress wants? I think the answer to that is no.”