



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY

Office of Inspector General

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September 25, 2026

The National Nuclear Security Administration Is Correcting an Oversight Lapse in the Department of Energy's Aviation Management Program



AUDIT REPORT



Department of Energy
Washington, DC 20585

September 25, 2026

MEMORANDUM FOR THE ADMINISTRATOR, NATIONAL NUCLEAR SECURITY
ADMINISTRATION; THE DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT

SUBJECT: Audit Report: *The National Nuclear Security Administration Is Correcting an Oversight Lapse in the Department of Energy's Aviation Management Program*

The attached report discusses our audit of the Department of Energy's aviation management program. This report contains one suggestion that, if fully implemented, should help ensure that the Department operates an aviation management program that continuously provides aviation support with the highest standards of safety, efficiency, and effectiveness.

We conducted this audit from August 2025 through July 2026 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. We appreciated the cooperation and assistance received during this audit.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sarah Nelson".

Sarah Nelson
Senior Official
Performing the Duties of the Inspector General
Office of Inspector General

cc: Deputy Secretary
Chief of Staff

DOE OIG HIGHLIGHTS

The National Nuclear Security Administration Is Correcting an Oversight Lapse in the Department of Energy's Aviation Management Program

Why We Performed This Audit

The Department of Energy established its Office of Aviation Management (OAM) in 1999 to centralize Departmental oversight and define roles and responsibilities in the management, oversight, and safety of the Department's aviation program.

In February 2025, OAM's last two employees retired, leaving it unstaffed. In September 2025, the National Nuclear Security Administration formally assumed responsibility for Department aviation management.

We initiated this audit to determine the extent to which the Department fulfilled its obligations related to the management of its aviation operations.

What We Found

We found that the Department did not always fulfill its aviation management responsibilities. Specifically, the Department did not always meet aviation management requirements during a 6-month lapse in oversight of its aviation management program that occurred when the Department did not timely reassign and transition OAM responsibilities. The Department did not effectively transition OAM responsibilities or authorities elsewhere until September 2025. As such, from February 2025 until the official designation of responsibilities to National Nuclear Security Administration officials in September 2025, there was no formally designated Department-level oversight of the aviation management program. During the lapse, several oversight responsibilities were delayed or became overdue. In addition, Department Order 440.2C, *Aviation Management and Safety*, became outdated, and the Department had not developed Department-level aviation management-related procedures.

To its credit, the National Nuclear Security Administration has taken actions to establish oversight and guidance to manage aviation activities throughout the Department. However, continued efforts are needed to further reduce risk. When multiple elements are left to address matters with external agencies independently and without guidance, the lack of know-how can lead to inconsistent, duplicative, or erroneous efforts.

What We Suggest

To address the issues identified in this report, we made one suggestion that, if fully implemented, should help ensure that the Department continues to operate an aviation management program that provides aviation support with the highest standards of safety, efficiency, and effectiveness.

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Background and Objective

The Department of Energy and its predecessor organization have used aircraft since the Manhattan Project for many purposes, including transporting material and personnel, security surveillance, scientific atmospheric research, and other mission-essential tasks. Aviation operations undertaken to perform governmental functions such as these operate in a public status and are not generally subject to Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) oversight and regulation. Therefore, Title 41, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 102-33, *Management of Government Aircraft*, requires the Department to regulate its own aviation operations by implementing standards that meet or exceed applicable civil or military rules to ensure Department elements operate aircraft safely, efficiently, and effectively.

In April 1999, the Secretary of Energy consolidated the management of Department aviation operations under the Office of Aviation Management (OAM) within the Office of Management, and the Director of OAM was designated as the Department's Senior Aviation Management Official (SAMO) in accordance with 41 CFR Part 102-33. According to the previous SAMO, as of early 2025, the Department maintained an aircraft inventory of about 700 aircraft worth approximately \$167 million, which required dedicated oversight to ensure its safe and secure operation. Department Order 440.2C, *Aviation Management and Safety*, established requirements and explained how OAM would meet the Department's oversight obligations through its aviation management program.

To meet Federal requirements, OAM's responsibilities included many administrative and oversight tasks, such as issuing guidance to aviation personnel across the Department, functioning as the approval authority for various documents, reviewing and approving candidates as accepted operators of commercial services, coordinating approvals to operate from the FAA, and satisfying national reporting requirements. For instance, Department Order 440.2C requires each Department element with management responsibility for Federal aircraft to develop Aviation Implementation Documents, with approval from the SAMO, to detail the standards and procedures by which it plans to manage, operate, and conduct its aviation operations. In addition, Department Order 440.2C also requires that prospective commercial aviation services providers successfully pass a safety audit and obtain approval from OAM before performing services. OAM also fulfilled certain Department reporting obligations to the FAA and the General Services Administration, provided oversight of all public status aviation operations, and ensured compliance with applicable Federal Aviation Regulations for civil aviation operations.

We initiated this audit to determine the extent to which the Department fulfilled its obligations related to the management of its aviation operations.

Results of Review

THE DEPARTMENT DID NOT ALWAYS FULFILL ITS AVIATION MANAGEMENT OBLIGATIONS

The Department did not always fulfill its aviation management responsibilities. Specifically, the Department allowed a 6-month lapse in oversight of its aviation management program and did

not always meet Federal aviation management requirements. In February 2025, the last two OAM employees retired, including the SAMO, leaving OAM defunct. At that time, the Department failed to take action to timely reassign and transition OAM responsibilities. The Department did not effectively transition OAM responsibilities or authorities elsewhere until September 5, 2025. As such, from February 28, 2025, until the official designation of responsibilities to the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) officials on September 5, 2025, there was no formally designated Department-level oversight of the aviation management program, which resulted in incomplete or overdue actions, a lack of guidance and inconsistencies across the Department, and unverified aircraft inventory and use data.

During the lapse of Department-level oversight for the aviation management program, several oversight responsibilities were delayed or became overdue. Specifically, the Department lacked a designated SAMO, required by 41 CFR Part 102-33.20 and Department Order 440.2C, to oversee the Department's aviation operations and serve as the single point-of-contact for coordinating with other Federal agencies for authorizations and required reporting. The designation and associated activities were necessary to ensure the Department met applicable requirements and obtained necessary approvals to continue legally conducting aviation operations. Additionally, the Department had no one assigned to request renewal of expiring authorizations from the FAA. Further, without a designated SAMO, Department elements did not have an authoritative source for guidance or assistance, which led to inconsistencies.

In addition, Department Order 440.2C is outdated. The purpose of Department Order 440.2C is to establish a policy framework that will ensure safety, efficiency, and effectiveness of the Department's aviation operations. Department-level oversight for its aviation management program is necessary to ensure that points-of-contact are accurately identified and communicated to all relevant personnel involved in aviation operations in the field so they can request and receive support, as needed. However, the dissolution of OAM in February 2025 rendered Department Order 440.2C outdated, and we found that aviation personnel in the field were operating without Department-level oversight. To its credit, after the transition of OAM responsibilities to NNSA, NNSA began the process of developing a new Department Order, which was issued in August 2026.

Finally, the Department did not establish procedures to address how aviation management officials should carry out aviation oversight responsibilities. Department Order 440.2C provided high-level requirements rather than program procedures and did not include the granularity needed to guide day-to-day operations. The now defunct OAM did not have aviation management program procedures detailing how its personnel accomplished aviation management responsibilities. Therefore, newly appointed NNSA personnel taking over those responsibilities did not have written procedures to follow or guide their work in accomplishing key oversight functions. Consequently, program guidance was limited to a list of responsibilities, which lacked the necessary detail to ensure consistent completion of tasks and effective risk management. Moreover, as aviation management responsibilities have been assumed by NNSA organizations and personnel, processes and procedures are likely to change. Therefore, NNSA will need to develop procedures explaining how it will fulfill all the Department's aviation management oversight responsibilities. To that end, an NNSA official stated that NNSA will develop the rest of the program in alignment with the new Department Order once it is approved.

CONCLUSION

Since formally assuming responsibility for the Department's aviation management program, NNSA has undertaken efforts to establish oversight and accompanying guidance to manage aviation activities. However, continued efforts are needed to further reduce the risk to the Department. When multiple elements are left to address matters with external agencies independently and without guidance, the lack of know-how can lead to inconsistent, duplicative, or erroneous efforts. A lapse in these critical areas could cause disruption of critical Government operations, services to the public, or national security, and lead to substantial negative impacts on the Department's ability to fulfill its statutory requirements.

Suggestion

To ensure that the Department's aviation management program provides aviation support with the highest standards of safety, efficiency, and effectiveness, we suggest that the Administrator, NNSA, continue to:

1. Develop aviation management program procedures that describe how NNSA will address the Department's responsibilities for aviation management and oversight.

Management Comments and OIG Response

Management comments are not required for reports that do not contain recommendations. As such, Department and NNSA management declined to submit official comments, and none are attached to this report. However, NNSA management submitted technical comments stating that it had replaced Department Order 440.2C with Department Order 440.2D, effective August 5, 2026. Therefore, we updated the report accordingly and removed a suggestion regarding the need to update Department Order 440.2C.

Objective, Scope, and Methodology

Objective

We initiated an audit to determine the extent to which the Department of Energy fulfilled its obligations related to the management of its aviation operations.

Scope

We performed this audit from August 2025 through July 2026 in Washington, DC; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Idaho Falls, Idaho; Golden, Colorado; Lakewood, Colorado; New Orleans, Louisiana; Portland, Oregon; and Tulsa, Oklahoma. The scope of this audit was limited to the management and oversight of the Department's aviation management program. The audit was conducted under Office of Inspector General project number A25OA016.

Methodology

To accomplish our audit objective, we:

- Reviewed applicable laws, regulations, policies and procedures, and Department guidance related to aviation management.
- Reviewed and analyzed prior reports related to the Department's aviation management.
- Interviewed personnel from the National Nuclear Security Administration's Office of Secure Transportation and Office of Environment, Safety, and Health; as well as other Department program offices and the former Senior Aviation Management Official.
- Analyzed the Department's aviation program documents and other archived information on the SharePoint site previously maintained by the defunct Office of Aviation Management to determine the full scope of the Department's responsibilities to manage and oversee aviation operations.
- Reviewed and analyzed the Department's aviation operations and their potential impact on mission essential functions.
- Reviewed issues and concerns raised during the lapse in the Department's management and oversight of aviation operations.

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective. We believe the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective. We assessed internal controls and

compliance with laws and regulations necessary to satisfy the audit objective. In particular, we assessed the design of control activities related to the Department's aviation management program. However, because our review was limited to these internal control components and underlying principles, it may not have disclosed all internal control deficiencies that may have existed at the time of this audit. Finally, we did not rely on computer-processed data to accomplish our audit objectives or to provide a basis for our conclusions.

Management officials waived an exit conference on September 16, 2026.

Related Reports

Office of Inspector General

- Inspection Report: [*Allegations of Flight Concerns at the National Nuclear Security Administration's Remote Sensing Laboratory*](#) (DOE-OIG-25-34, September 2025). The Office of Inspector General received a complaint alleging that Mission Support and Test Services, LLC management at the Remote Sensing Laboratory approved the transport of a supplemental pilot from Tennessee to Joint Base Andrews using a National Nuclear Security Administration-owned aircraft and did not list the supplemental pilot on the flight manifest. We initiated the inspection to determine the facts and circumstances regarding the alleged flight concerns at the Remote Sensing Laboratory. The allegation was substantiated and identified contributing factors including the lack of: (1) a documented policy on readiness scores and aircraft availability requirements; (2) documented communication between the Nevada Field Office and Mission Support and Test Services, LLC officials; and (3) guidance pertaining to National Nuclear Security Administration public aircraft operations. The allegation that Mission Support and Test Services, LLC did not add the supplemental pilot to the flight manifest was also substantiated and attributed to the lack of a formal written policy. To address these issues, the Office of Inspector General made five recommendations to ensure that National Nuclear Security Administration-owned aircraft are used for Government purposes, and that flight manifest information is accurate.

Government Accountability Office

- Report: *Drones: Actions Needed to Better Support Remote Identification in the National Airspace* (GAO-24-106158, June 2024). The Government Accountability Office (GAO) reviewed issues related to Remote Identification (Remote ID), which is intended to help the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), law enforcement, and others locate drone operators flying in an unsafe manner or where prohibited. The review assessed: (1) potential law enforcement uses for Remote ID, and related Federal support; and (2) any limitations the FAA and stakeholders may face using Remote ID for advanced operations. GAO reviewed: FAA guidance and resources for Remote ID and the FAA's plans for integrating drones into the national airspace; interviewed FAA and Department of Homeland Security officials, law enforcement, and industry stakeholders; and reviewed Department of Homeland Security efforts to develop a Remote ID application. GAO made three recommendations to the FAA, including that the FAA: develop resources to help tribal, state, and local law enforcement use Remote ID; develop a plan and timeline for a Remote ID interface; and identify a path forward for providing real-time, networked data about the location and status of drones. GAO also recommended that the Department of Homeland Security develop a plan and timeline for its Remote ID application.

- Report: [*Aviation Safety: Federal Efforts to Address Unauthorized Drone Flights Near Airports*](#) (GAO-24-107195, March 2024). GAO reviewed drone detection and mitigation issues at airports. The report examined Federal and local roles for responding to a drone incident at an airport, Federal legal authorities related to using drone detection and counter-drone technology at airports, and FAA plans for using the technology at airports and its effects on drone integration efforts. GAO recommended that Congress, as appropriate, amend pertinent statutory authorities related to drone detection and counter-drone operations at airports. GAO also recommended that the FAA ensure its drone integration strategy reflects how it will assess the effects of counter-drone technologies.

FEEDBACK

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