



**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

September 24, 2026

The Honorable Bryan Bedford  
Administrator  
Federal Aviation Administration  
800 Independence Avenue SW  
Washington, DC 20591

Dear Administrator Bedford:

Thank you for your September 10 response to my July 24 letter regarding the absence of functional awareness in low-altitude airspace, and for your support for a pilot program dedicated to closing that gap. I am glad the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) shares the Committee's view that timely authorization determination is essential to both aviation safety and national security, and I appreciate your willingness to act on the Subcommittee's recommendation.

I write because the path described in your response, as the Committee understands it, will not meet the schedule set out in my July letter or the operational need behind that schedule. The first concern is scope. Your response describes a pilot with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to evaluate the architecture for a low-altitude air domain awareness system, with an initial step focused on integrating a complete detection picture. Detection is the half of this problem the United States has largely solved.

The gap identified in my July letter, and in this Subcommittee's own hearing record, is determination: the ability to establish in real time whether a detected aircraft is authorized to be where it is. An architecture evaluation organized around the detection picture risks producing a more complete view of the same unanswered question. Detection without determination is not awareness, and a better picture of an aircraft no one can clear or rule out does not change what the officer on the ground is able to do about it.

The second concern is time. A NASA research and development effort of this kind, from initiation through architecture evaluation to anything a federal, state, or local partner can use in the field, is measured in years rather than months. Practitioners familiar with that process place the range at two to four years. The Committee requested initiation within 90 days of July 24 and interim findings within 180 days of initiation for a reason. The Subcommittee is examining counter-UAS authorities now, and the operational calendar will not wait on a research calendar. Workshops convened in August and September 2026 to identify next steps toward integrated detection and authorization capabilities are a reasonable beginning for a research program. They are not a capability. They do not place a real-time authorization determination in the hands of an

airport operator or a law enforcement officer before the 250th anniversary events conclude, before Part 108 operations scale, or before the 2028 Olympic Games in Los Angeles.

This is an unmet need that warrants prioritization on public safety grounds alone. The commercial market already offers capabilities that can perform real-time authorization determinations using existing FAA data sources, with systems currently deployed and operational. These capabilities could be evaluated in an operationally relevant environment within months, not years.

The question before the agency is therefore not whether this capability can be developed, but whether the FAA will evaluate and deploy existing solutions on a public safety timeline while longer-term research efforts continue in parallel. Commercial deployment also offers a critical advantage that a research-only approach cannot provide within the relevant timeframe: scale. The same authorization determination layer needed to support security missions can also enable the commercial operations the FAA is working to facilitate. Both missions are waiting on the same missing capability.

Accordingly, I request the following:

- 1) First, the September 10 response did not identify the unobligated balances available to support the pilot, the office and officials who will be accountable for it, or the barriers, whether legal, technical, or budgetary, that the agency believes stand in the way. I renew that request and ask that it be answered specifically.
- 2) Second, I request that the FAA direct the Office of Advanced Aviation Technologies to conduct a parallel evaluation of commercially available authorization determination capability, using existing procurement authorities and requiring no new appropriation, culminating in a live demonstration in one or more operationally relevant environments within 180 days of the date of this letter.
- 3) Third, I request written confirmation as to whether the agency considers the NASA activity to satisfy the 90-day initiation requested in my July 24 letter, and a schedule with specific dates for each deliverable the Committee requested, distinguishing the research track from the fielding track.
- 4) Fourth, I request confirmation that completion of the NASA architecture assessment will not be treated as a precondition for agency decisions to evaluate, procure, or field authorization determination capability.

The agency's work with NASA has value and should continue. Research and fielding are not the same activity, and the Committee does not intend for the second to wait on the first. I ask that the Committee be kept apprised of progress on both tracks as the work proceeds. The Subcommittee will examine the agency's progress in closing the functional awareness gap as part of its ongoing oversight of the FAA, and expects the record of that work to reflect a fielding schedule the public safety need can actually survive.

Thank you again for your response and for your service to the flying public. I look forward to working with you on this.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "T. Nehls", written over a horizontal line.

Troy E. Nehls  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Aviation  
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

CC:

The Honorable Sean P. Duffy, Secretary, U.S. Department of Transportation  
The Honorable Ryan McCormack, Under Secretary of Transportation for Policy, U.S.  
Department of Transportation