



Savannah River Site Watch

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**FOIA Document on SRS Drone Sightings in 2016 Reveal All Sightings Unconfirmed by Site Security;
Huge Variety of Alleged “Unmanned Aerial System” Reports, All Cases Terminated or Negative**

Were Unverified Sightings due to Confusion, Mass Hysteria or were any Legitimate? Why no photos?



Photo of this fixed-wing aircraft - the only “drone” photo taken by SRS in 2016

Columbia, SC – Documents provided by the U.S. Department of Energy to Savannah River Site Watch (SRS Watch) under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) reveal no confirmation of drones at Savannah River Site (SRS) in 2016 despite numerous reports about them.

The documents confirm that the “drone scare” of that year were based on unsubstantiated sightings, calling into question what stimulated the multitude of sightings of various types of drones over the site and why SRS officials repeatedly hyped up the “sightings” as they did.

The 33-page document released to Savannah River Site Watch is titled “Unmanned Aerial System (USA) Reported Sightings on SRS” is dated December 15, 2016. The document includes a short description of each of the 21 sightings, with a longer compilation of redacted documents by Centerra, a private company in charge of SRS security, which is labeled “Incident Report” or “Uniform Crime Report” for each of the sightings.

The FOIA documents reveal that a wide variety of Unmanned Aerial Systems (drones) were reported by SRS personnel, with shapes from round to fixed wing, large - up to 20 feet in length - to small, and with a variety of colors and markings. One was reported to be operated by jet engines and they were allegedly seen at varying altitudes. The document reveals that response by Centerra on receiving reports of the

drones was prompt and that most cases the on-site investigations and interviews were terminated within an hour.

The 21 sightings were reported from June 19, 2016 to November 17, 2016. In at least 12 of the 21 sightings covered in the released documents, the "DOE helicopter" was deployed, all with negative results.

"SRS reported that there was an all out, concerted effort to repeatedly fly drones over the site during a short window of time in 2016 but the released documents make those claims nonsensical and unbelievable," said Tom Clements of Savannah River Site Watch. "The 'drone scare of 2016' has proved to an illusion but it remains unclear what caused it or why," added Clements. "If there were any drones, which looks doubtful, I believe it may have been hobbyists who were also SRS workers."

An SRS official confirmed in a presentation to the SRS Citizens Advisory Board on that no drone sightings were confirmed from June 19, 2016 through May 22, 2017. "The report by SRS of no confirmed drone sightings is validated in the FOIA documents," added Clements.

Though it contains nothing of security interest about SRS operations the document was marked "Official Use Only" (OUO) prior to its redaction and release, perhaps to control circulation of the potentially embarrassing nature of its contents. The OUO designation is a low order restriction that does not cover classified information and rightly protects personal information.

According to a [DOE website labeled "Official Use Only Information,"](#) "OUO is a Department of Energy (DOE) category of sensitive unclassified information whose release to the wrong person could damage Governmental, commercial, or private interests. This category of information is intended to identify and protect sensitive unclassified information that is not otherwise classified or controlled. A document containing OUO information must be marked so that anyone having the document knows that it contains such information." The website lists examples of OUO information, including "Law enforcement information, such as inspection or appraisal procedures, vulnerability assessments, or any information that could help someone who is attempting to violate a law and avoid detection."

"As personal and confidential information has been redacted from the released information, it contains nothing of a commercial or sensitive nature and was correctly released," according to Tom Clements, director of SRS Watch. "The only reason we can see that the information was not voluntarily released without a FOIA request is that it can be seen as embarrassing given the large variety in types of drones that were allegedly seen and that all of the cases ended in negative findings."

In addition to requesting reports on the drone sightings, SRS Watch requested any photos that were taken of any drones. The FOIA response document contained two blurry photos of a fixed-wing single-engine airplane, which could have been the crop duster mentioned in one of the sighting reports. (See report #7 of June 30, 2016.) Despite sending out the SRS helicopter on many occasions and with alleged observers on the ground, no other photos were taken or provided, as asked for in the FOIA request.

“As no photos of drones were provided, this means that none were taken of any actual drones, which seems to confirm that many, if not all of the sightings, were not actually drones,” according to Clements of SRS Watch.

It is unknown if SRS or Centerra followed up in each case to determine what had happened and if the sightings were real, imagined or due to misinterpretation of other things, such as aircraft legitimately overflying the site. “Though the drone-reporting episodes have ended, the reasons for the ‘drone scare of 2016’ remain of concern and the investigation as to what caused it needs to be resolved,” according to SRS Watch’s Clements.

Notes:

FOIA response with “Unmanned Aerial System (USA) Reported Sightings on SRS” and Centerra incident reports, released on September 22, 2017 to SRS Watch – linked here:

http://www.srswatch.org/uploads/2/7/5/8/27584045/foia_received_on_drones_september_22_2017.pdf

SRS presentation “Unmanned Aircraft Systems Overview, May 22, 2017, to SRS CAB:

https://www.srs.gov/general/outreach/srs-cab/library/meetings/2017/slm/SRS_UAS_Overview.pdf