

New Mexico observatory closed for security reasons to reopen

September 17 2018

An observatory in the mountains of southern New Mexico that had been closed since early September because of an undisclosed security concern is scheduled to reopen on Monday, officials managing the facility said.

The Sunspot Solar Observatory no longer faces a [security](#) threat to staff, the Association of Universities for Research in Astronomy said in a statement Sunday. The facility closed on Sept. 6.

The association has hired a temporary security team to patrol the [observatory](#) when it reopens. "Given the significant amount of publicity the temporary closure has generated, and the consequent expectation of an unusual number of visitors to the site, we are temporarily engaging a security service while the facility returns to a normal working environment," the association said.

Authorities have not revealed the nature of the security threat the observatory faced. The FBI has referred all questions to the association.

"We recognize that the lack of communications while the facility was vacated was concerning and frustrating for some. However, our desire to provide additional information had to be balanced against the risk that, if spread at the time, the news would alert the suspect and impede the law enforcement investigation. That was a risk we could not take," the association said.

Located atop Sacramento Peak, the observatory was established in 1947.

It overlooks the Tularosa Basin—an expanse of desert that includes the city of Alamogordo, Holloman Air Force Base, White Sands Missile Range, White Sands National Monument and the site of the world's first atomic bomb test.

The telescope at Sunspot was originally built by the U.S. Air Force. After several years of operation, it was transferred to the National Solar Observatory, which is part of the National Science Foundation.

New Mexico State University in 2016 launched an initiative funded by the foundation to upgrade and update the facility through the newly formed Sunspot Solar Observatory Consortium.

Officials said Sunspot's one-of-a-kind telescope produces some of the sharpest images of the sun available in the world. Data from observations done at Sunspot is sent to New Mexico State University servers and can be used by researchers around the world.

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