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Big white ball in the sky prompts plethora of calls

By The Associated Press

Authorities were mystified by sightings across the Northeast which provoked dozens of calls to police and fire departments about a "large white ball descending in the sky."

"We aren't missing anything," said Federal Aviation Administration duty officer Bill Nantz in New York, dismissing the possibility it was a stray aircraft. "We have no idea at this time what it was."

"Beats us," said Edward Yandrich of the National Weather Service.

Jim Chanarde of the Union City College Astronomer's Club in Cranford, N.J., said the observatory there sighted the object through a telescope at about 8:33 p.m. Tuesday.

Although the Comet Austin is in the evening sky this month it appears on the horizon and "has nothing of this brightness," said Chanarde, who believed it was a meteor.

Dr. Kenneth Franklin, an astronomer at the Hayden Planetarium in New York, said it may

have been the planet Jupiter. "Jupiter is low in the sky now and it can be very bright," he said.

"It looked like space junk," said Ed Worth Jr., of Center Valley, Pa., who said he first noticed the object when it illuminated the tail pipes of his motorcycle.

Some people said the objects changed colors as it faded, according to Nantz.

He theorized a meteor may have caused the display, reported to authorities by concerned citizens from Washington, D.C., to Long Island in New York.

Dr. Allen Barwick, an adjunct astronomy professor at American University in Washington, explained the light show as a normal meteor shower, caused by the Earth's movement through debris left by Haley's Comet, which passed by in 1910 and is due back in 1985-86.

"When the comet came in close to the sun, the particles were spread out from it and left behind ... these particles come into our atmosphere and burn up," he said.