



U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Legislative Affairs

Office of the Assistant Attorney General

Washington, D. C. 20530

February 4, 2011

The Honorable Charles E. Grassley
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Grassley:

This responds to your letters, dated January 27, 2011 and January 31, 2011, to Acting Director Kenneth Melson of the Department's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF), regarding Project Gunrunner. We appreciate your strong support for the Department's law enforcement mission.

At the outset, the allegation described in your January 27 letter—that ATF “sanctioned” or otherwise knowingly allowed the sale of assault weapons to a straw purchaser who then transported them into Mexico—is false. ATF makes every effort to interdict weapons that have been purchased illegally and prevent their transportation to Mexico. Indeed, an important goal of Project Gunrunner is to stop the flow of weapons from the United States to drug cartels in Mexico. Since its inception in 2006, Project Gunrunner investigations have seized in excess of 10,000 firearms and 1.1 million rounds of ammunition destined for Mexico. Hundreds of individuals have been convicted of criminal offenses arising from these investigations and many others are on-going. ATF remains committed to investigating and dismantling firearms trafficking organizations, and will continue to pursue those cases vigorously with all available investigative resources.

In this vein, the suggestion that Project Gunrunner focuses simply on straw purchasers is incorrect. The defendants named in the indictments referenced in your January 27 letter include leaders of a sophisticated gun trafficking organization. One of the goals of the investigation that led to those indictments is to dismantle the entire trafficking organization, not merely to arrest straw purchasers.

I also want to assure you that ATF has made no attempt to retaliate against any of its agents regarding this matter. We recognize the importance of protecting employees from retaliation relating to their disclosures of waste, fraud, and abuse. ATF employees receive annual training on their rights under the Whistleblower Protection Act, and those with knowledge of waste, fraud, or abuse are encouraged to communicate directly with the

The Honorable Charles E. Grassley
Page Two

Department's Office of Inspector General. These protections do not negate the Department's legitimate interest in protecting confidential information about pending criminal investigations.

We also want to protect investigations and the law enforcement personnel who directly conduct them from inappropriate political influence. For this reason, we respectfully request that Committee staff not contact law enforcement personnel seeking information about pending criminal investigations, including the investigation into the death of Customs and Border Patrol Agent Brian Terry. Like you, we are deeply concerned by his murder, and we are actively investigating the matter. Please direct any inquiry into his killing to this office.

The Department would be pleased to provide a briefing to Committee staff about Project Gunrunner and ATF's efforts to work with its law enforcement partners to build cases that will disrupt and dismantle criminal organizations. That briefing would not address the on-going criminal investigation referenced in your letter. As you know, the Department has a long-standing policy against the disclosure of non-public information about pending criminal investigations, which protects the independence and effectiveness of our law enforcement efforts as well as the privacy and due process interests of individuals who may or may not ever be charged with criminal offenses.

We hope that this information is helpful and look forward to briefing Committee staff about Project Gunrunner. Please do not hesitate to contact this office if we may provide additional assistance about this or any other matter.

Sincerely,



Ronald Weich
Assistant Attorney General

cc: The Honorable Patrick J. Leahy
Chairman



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Washington, D. C. 20530

March 2, 2011

The Honorable Charles E. Grassley
Ranking Member
Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Grassley:

This responds to your letters, dated February 9, 2011 and February 16, 2011, which reiterated your concerns about gun trafficking along the Southwest border and requested documents that apparently relate to a particular ongoing investigation in Arizona.

We appreciated the opportunity to brief Committee staff on February 10, 2011, regarding the efforts by Department prosecutors and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) to interdict weapons sold illegally along the Southwest border and to hold accountable the leadership of criminal organizations that support this trafficking.

As you know, we are not in a position to disclose documents relating to any ongoing investigation, nor can we confirm or deny the existence of records in our ongoing investigative files, based upon the Department's longstanding policy regarding pending matters. We would appreciate the opportunity to confer with your staff if we can respond to your interests in another way, consistent with that policy.

The Attorney General has asked the Acting Inspector General to evaluate the concerns that have been raised about ATF investigative actions in light of its recent review of Project Gunrunner to determine whether additional examination by her Office is appropriate. We appreciate your interest in our law enforcement efforts and again ask that you direct to the Inspector General individuals who believe they have knowledge of misconduct by Department employees.

We hope that this information is helpful. Please do not hesitate to contact this office if we may be of assistance in this or any other matter.

Sincerely,

Ronald Weich
Assistant Attorney General

cc: The Honorable Patrick J. Leahy
Chairman



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Washington, D.C. 20530

March 8, 2011

The Honorable Charles E. Grassley
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Grassley:

This responds to your letters, dated March 3, 2011, and March 4, 2011, which reiterated your concerns about investigations into weapons trafficking along the Southwest border.

We appreciate your continuing concern about this matter. We have referred your letters and the attached documents to the Department's Office of the Inspector General (OIG). As you know, the Attorney General has asked the Acting Inspector General to evaluate concerns raised about Project Gunrunner, the effort by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) to interdict weapons purchased illegally for transport to Mexican cartels. We urge you to provide the OIG with any additional information that you think would be helpful to its review.

We hope that this information is helpful. Please do not hesitate to contact this office if we may be of assistance in this or any other matter.

Sincerely,

Ronald Weich
Assistant Attorney General

cc: The Honorable Patrick J. Leahy
Chairman