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THE HILL

Grassley vows to block nominees until he gets answers on gun sales

By Jordy Yager - 05/25/11 06:11 AM ET

Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) is vowing to block President Obama's nominations until he gets detailed answers on a controversial program that resulted in drug cartels acquiring more than 1,300 firearms from the U.S.

Grassley is pressing the Department of Justice (DOJ) on who initiated the "Gun Runner" program that authorized the sale of guns to people acting as straw purchasers for drug cartels in Mexico. Gun Runner might have contributed to the death of at least one federal agent.

As the ranking Republican on the Judiciary Committee, Grassley has been working closely with House Oversight and Government Reform Committee Chairman Darrell Issa (R-Calif.) for the past several months, gathering documents and conducting interviews with DOJ officials and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) agents in an attempt to find out who gave the order for the operation.

Sources note that unlike Grassley, Issa has subpoena power.

Gun Runner and another operation called Fast and Furious were designed to dismantle the gun-smuggling routes that drug cartels use to ferry high-powered assault rifles from the U.S. into Mexico. By allowing people to illegally purchase large quantities of the weapons from gun dealers, officials hoped to trace the firearms to the drug cartel members and prosecute them. But ATF whistleblowers allege that officials lost track of the guns.

Two of the guns from the operation were found at the scene of an Arizona gun battle in December between U.S. law enforcement and members of a drug gang. The firefight killed Border Patrol Agent Brian Terry, but officials have not revealed whether the bullet that struck him came from the guns the ATF was supposed to be tracking.

Attorney General Eric Holder has denied knowing of Gun Runner and launched an Inspector General (IG) investigation into the matter earlier this year.

Obama, in an interview with the Spanish-language television network Univision in March, said that neither he nor Holder had any knowledge of the program's existence before allegations arose from whistleblowers within the ATF.

Grassley told The Hill that the DOJ officials have not been forthcoming on his requests for documents. If they continue to be unresponsive, Grassley said, he will hold Obama's judicial nominations hostage.

"We're just getting stonewalled," Grassley said in an interview. "The next step is we're going to hold up nominations until we get their attention."

Grassley, who has irritated Democratic and Republican administrations with his aggressive oversight, did not specify which Obama nominations he is targeting.

Grassley and Issa separately grilled Holder earlier this month before their respective committees.

“At best, the ATF was careless in authorizing the sale of thousands of guns to straw purchasers,” said Grassley. “At worst, our own government knowingly participated in arming criminals, drug cartels and those who later killed federal agents.”

Holder stressed the seriousness with which the DOJ was treating the issue, noting the IG investigation.

Issa told The Hill recently that he was not satisfied with Holder’s testimony before his panel.

“They stonewalled us on a subpoena,” Issa said, claiming that documents shown to his committee were heavily redacted. “So they’ve made no sufficient response to our subpoena. We consider that it continues to be a cover-up at the highest level of Justice.”

A Republican aide on Issa’s committee this week said DOJ has since increased its level of assistance and has been more accommodating to the panel’s requests for documents and interviews with DOJ and ATF officials.

Rep. Elijah Cummings (Md.), the ranking Democrat on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, said. “We want to be sure that whatever investigation there is, is thorough, but that it does not interfere with Justice’s investigations.

“I think Justice has made reasonable efforts to extend themselves to us and ask us to work with them so that we can still get the information we want and at the same time they can protect their witnesses. I think the problem here is, is the question ... How deeply is Justice itself implicated?” he added.

Asked why the department was not providing more information to Congress, a DOJ spokeswoman referred The Hill to separate letters Assistant Attorney General Ronald Weich sent to Grassley and Issa at the beginning of this month.

In the letters, Weich said that the DOJ could not deliver the entirety of the information Issa requested because of “pending criminal investigations and the prosecution of 20 individuals” relating to Project Gun Runner and Operation Fast and Furious. The requested information could jeopardize the prosecution, he said.

Weich added that “the executive branch over many administrations has taken the position that only a chairman can speak for a committee when conducting oversight.”

Grassley objected and pointed to a D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals ruling from 1979, which found that the White House has no authority to restrict Congress’s requests for information.

The Iowa Republican has been able to get some of his requested DOJ documents through Issa, who subpoenaed the ATF for records in April.

Source:

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