
From: Richardson, Margaret (SMO)
To: Grindler, Gary (OAG)
CC: Wilkinson, Monty (OAG)
Sent: 6/15/2011 4:42:18 PM
Subject: FW: Fast & Furious Clips

fyi

From: Schmalzer, Tracy (SMO)
Sent: Wednesday, June 15, 2011 4:28 PM
To: Weich, Ron (SMO); Burton, Faith (SMO); Axelrod, Matthew (ODAG); Reich, Steven (ODAG); Gaston, Molly (SMO); Wilkinson, Monty (OAG); Richardson, Margaret (SMO); Goldberg, Stuart (ODAG); Colborn, Paul P (SMO); Monaco, Lisa (ODAG)
Subject: Fast & Furious Clips

House Panel Slams 'Fast and Furious' Gun Operation Tied to Border Agent's Death

Fox News

June 15, 2011

A U.S. law enforcement operation intended to crack down on major weapons traffickers on the Southwest border spiraled out of control as federal agents were told by superiors to "stand down" and ignore weapons bought in Arizona headed for Mexico, a House panel heard Wednesday.

Three federal firearms investigators told the House Oversight and Government Reform committee that they wanted to "intervene and interdict" loads of guns, but were repeatedly ordered to step aside.

"Allowing loads of weapons that we knew to be destined for criminals -- this was the plan," John Dodson, a Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives agent who testified to the panel. "It was so mandated."

He added: "My supervisors directed me and my colleagues not to make any stop or arrest, but rather, to keep the straw purchaser under surveillance while allowing the guns to walk."

ATF agent Olindo James Casa said that "on several occasions I personally requested to interdict or seize firearms, but I was always ordered to stand down and not to seize the firearms."

Rep. Darrell Issa, chairman of the panel, has spearheaded the congressional investigation into the ATF's "Operation Fast and Furious." He said the hopes of scoring a knockout blow against the Mexican cartels badly misfired, and then continued over the objections of federal agents.

The program came to a crashing halt in January with the death of U.S. Border Patrol Agent Brian Terry, shot by an AK-47 purchased a year earlier by Jamie Avila, a known gun smuggler who had been under ATF surveillance since November 2009.

Members of Terry's family appeared before the committee Wednesday, asking how it happened and what will be done to ensure it doesn't happen again.

"We hope that all individuals involved in Brian's murder, and those that played a role in putting the assault weapons in their hands are found and prosecuted to the full extent of the law," said Robert Heyer, a cousin of Terry.

Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, said accountability is needed and the only question is how high does it go.

"The president said he didn't authorize it, and that the attorney general didn't authorize it. They have both admitted that quote unquote a serious mistake may have been made," he said. "There are a lot of questions and a lot of

investigating to do, but one thing has become clear already -- this was no mistake."

Issa's hearing came one day after his panel released a draft report concluding the busted operation was a deadly strategy that left a trail of blood and bodies throughout the Southwest.

The report concluded that a reckless and irresponsible chain of command ignored repeated warnings the plan would fail.

"You've got people who are dead, you have weapons that are missing and you have an administration that doesn't seem to want to take any accountability for it," said Rep. Jason Chaffetz, R-Utah, and a member of the panel. "There is absolutely no justification, no justification for this. There are people that are going to have to be held accountable."

Findings from the preliminary report include:

-- Agents expected to interdict weapons, yet were told to stand down and "just surveil." Agents therefore did not act. They watched straw purchasers buy hundreds of weapons illegally and transfer those weapons to unknown third parties and stash houses.

-- ATF agents complained about the strategy of allowing guns to walk in Operation Fast and Furious. Leadership ignored their concerns. Instead, supervisors told the agents to "get with the program" because senior ATF officials had sanctioned the operation.

-- Agents knew that given the large numbers of weapons being trafficked to Mexico, tragic results were a near certainty.

-- Operation Fast and Furious contributed to the increasing violence and deaths in Mexico. This result was regarded with "giddy" optimism by ATF supervisors hoping that guns recovered at crime scenes in Mexico would provide the nexus to straw purchasers in Phoenix.

That last finding is sure to anger Mexico, which has so far been muted in its criticism. In a March 2010 memo, ATF says it allowed gun smugglers to buy 359 guns while 958 people died in Mexico the same month. Internally, the agency was "trumpeting up the violence that was occurring as a result of an ATF sanctioned program."

Fox News' William LaJeunesse contributed to this report.

Agents worried ATF program connected with Loughner gun

The Hill - Jordy Yager
June 15, 2011

Federal agents were worried that the gun used to shoot Rep. Gabrielle Giffords (D-Ariz.) in the head could have been part of the controversial "Fast and Furious" gun-tracking operation. They learned eventually that it had not, sources said.

The "Fast and Furious" operation was a program run by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) that authorized and monitored the sale of weapons to known and suspected straw purchasers for Mexican drug cartels with the stated goal of exposing and dismantling gun trafficking routes.

House Oversight and Government Reform Committee Chairman Darrell Issa (R-Calif.) held a hearing on the mired program on Wednesday, during which ATF agents testified that they had been ordered to let guns "walk" into the hands of suspected and known criminals with little hope of ever seeing them again or being able to successfully track them to their final owners.

When news of Giffords shooting broke in January, Peter Forcelli, the group supervisor with ATF's Phoenix field division, said that agents were anxious that the gun allegedly used by Jared Loughner may have been obtained under

the guidance of the “Fast and Furious” operation.

“I received a phone call from my public information officer, who is a friend of mine, who said that there was concern from the chain-of-command that the gun was hopefully not a ‘Fast and Furious’ gun,” said Forcelli. The gun allegedly used by Loughner was not purchased under the guidance of the program, according to law enforcement sources.

Blood On Their Hands: Giving Guns to Criminals Was the Plan All Along

The Town Hall - Email Katie Pavlich

June 15, 2011

**“Allowing loads of weapons that we knew to be destined for criminals, this was the plan. It was so mandated.”
–Special Agent John Dodson ATF Phoenix Field Division.**

Damning new evidence from Capitol Hill shows that ATF Directors and Justice Department Officials knew about and encouraged the purposeful trafficking of thousands of weapons across the southern border, despite strong objections from ATF agents. Thousands of innocent lives were taken as the result, including those of Border Patrol Agent Brian Terry and ICE Agent Jamie Zapata.

New emails released by House Oversight Chairman Darrell Issa show that ATF Director Kenneth Melson was briefed weekly about Operation Fast and Furious and watched a live feed of straw purchasers (who serve as middle men, purchasing guns and giving them to cartel members) in Arizona gun shops from his cozy Washington D.C. office. Emails also show that Deputy Assistant Director for Field Operations William McMahon was enthusiastic about the operation.

“An e-mail from April 12, 2010, indicates that Acting Director Melson was very much in the weeds with Operation Fast and Furious. After a detailed briefing of the program by the ATF Phoenix Field Division, Acting Director Melson had a plethora of follow-up questions that required additional research to answer. As the document indicates, Mr. Melson was interested in the IP Address for hidden cameras located inside cooperating gun shops. With this information, Acting Director Melson was able to sit at his desk in Washington and – himself – watch a live feed of the straw buyers entering the gun stores to purchase dozens of AK-47 variants,” Chairman Issa said in his opening statement.

Senator Charles Grassley, who has been working closely with Rep. Issa, pointed out that officials from the Justice Department have been stonewalling the investigation for months. Attorney General Eric Holder has said he is unaware of who ordered the operation.

“On October 26, 2009, emails indicate that there was a meeting of senior law enforcement officials at the Justice Department. It appears to have included the heads every law enforcement component of the Department, including directors of the FBI, the DEA and the ATF. It also included the U.S. Attorneys for all the Southwest border states, the Director of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force and the Chair of the Attorney General’s Advisory Committee,” Grassley testified.

Emails also show that ATF encouraged gun dealers to sell to straw buyers, in spite of their own hesitance to do so.

"ATF encouraged gun dealers to sell to straw buyers. Emails prove that at least one dealer worried prophetically about the risk. He [a dealer] wrote to ATF about his concern that a border patrol agent might end up facing the wrong end of one of these guns. ATF supervisors told the dealer not to worry. So, the agents said it was a bad idea. And, the gun dealers said it was a bad idea, but ATF supervisors continued anyway", Grassley said.

Border Patrol Agent Brian Terry was that agent. He was killed by cartel member 18 miles north of the U.S.-Mexico border near Rio Rico, Ariz. Agent Terry was a fighter-a former Marine who was willing to put everything he had, including his life, on the line for his country. He was dedicated to his job, his family and the United States.

“It was just ten days before Christmas last year, when our family received the devastating news; Brian had been shot and killed while engaged in a firefight with a group of individuals seeking to do harm to Americans citizens and others,” said Robert Heyer, the cousin of Terry, testifying on behalf of the entire Terry family. “Brian did ultimately come home that Christmas; we buried him not far from the house that he was raised in just prior to Christmas day. The gifts that Brian had picked out with such thought and care began to arrive in the mail that same week. With each delivery, we felt the indescribable pain of Brian’s death, but at the same time also remembered his amazing love and spirit.”

ICE Agent Jamie Zapata was killed in Mexico in February 2011 while on assignment. He was killed by a gun traced back to Operation Fast and Furious, however, Zapata’s family will never see justice. Once guns flow back into Mexico, they are no longer within the jurisdiction of the United States, leaving the government without any authority to prosecute anyone for any crime.

Three Special ATF Agents gave additional incriminating testimony. ATF Agent Dodson, one of the first whistleblowers to come out publicly against Operation Fast and Furious, provided details about the failed operation.

“I was involved in this operation, we monitored as they purchased hand guns, AK-47 variants, and .50 caliber rifles almost daily. Rather than contradict any enforcement actions, we took notes, we recorded observations, we tracked movements of these individuals for a short time after their purchases, but nothing more. Knowing all the while, just days after these purchases, the guns that we saw these individuals buy would begin turning up at crime scenes in the United States and Mexico, we still did nothing,” Dodson said. **“Allowing loads of weapons that we knew to be destined for criminals, this was the plan. It was so mandated.”**

And there still isn’t an explanation as to why.

“Allowing firearms to be trafficked to criminals is a dangerous and deadly strategy. The thought that the techniques used in the “Fast and Furious” investigation would result in “taking down a cartel” given the toothless nature of the “straw purchasing law” and the lack of a “firearms trafficking statute” is, in my opinion, delusional,” Special Agent Peter Forcelli said. “This operation, which in my opinion endangered the American public, was orchestrated in conjunction with Assistant U.S. Attorney Emory Hurley. [Emory Hurley is the same Assistant U.S. Attorney who previously prevented agents from using some of the common and accepted law enforcement techniques that are employed elsewhere in the United States to investigate and prosecute gun crimes.] I have read documents that indicate that his boss, U.S. Attorney Dennis Burke, also agreed with the direction of the case.”

There is no way to prosecute drug cartels in Mexico even if firearms trafficking had been successful in locating them. They are not within United States jurisdiction.

“I can’t think of a single, logical strategy as to why this would have worked,” Forcelli said. “This was a catastrophic disaster.”

According to testimony, it has become common practice for retaliation to occur against ATF Agents who spoke out against their supervisor's corruption, even when operations had no logical backing.

Forcelli also added that while the ATF was ordering gun dealers to sell to straw buyers under surveillance, gun dealers were taking the heat for it, and being held responsible for violence in Mexico. He stressed gun dealers were not the problem. In fact gun dealers were helpful in pursuing cases against cartel members, making it blatantly clear law abiding gun owners are not at fault, but the government is.

Issa said he will continue to investigate in order to find the truth and get to the bottom of the operation. The government owes the truth to the American people and to the family of Brian Terry and Jamie Zapata, he explained. “There has now become a focus on getting the truth out.”

Department of Justice: We Don't Know Who Authorized Operation Fast and Furious

The Town Hall - Email Katie Pavlich
June 15, 2011

Deny deny deny. Take no responsibility.

Department of Justice Assistant Attorney General Ronald Weich couldn't answer a few simple questions asked by House Oversight Committee Chairman Darrell Issa surrounding Operation Fast and Furious today on Capitol Hill.

"Who authorized this program that got people killed? Who here in Washington authorized it?"

Weich:

"We don't know."

Testimony and overwhelming evidence presented during a hearing today on Capitol Hill indicates otherwise. Multiple emails show high profile meetings between Department of Justice and ATF officials about Operation Fast and Furious. Testimony from ATF agents exposed that high ranking officials in the Justice Department and ATF supervisors were ordering lower ranking agents to carry out the lethal operation.

"Why did the Obama Administration authorize the illegal trafficking of over 2000 weapons to Mexico," Rep. Jason Chaffetz asked Weich.

Weich responded by saying he did not have the authority to answer that question, either. Weich also couldn't affirm if Operation Fast and Furious has been discontinued. Weich also claimed in his opening statement during testimony that the Department of Justice has been cooperating with the Oversight Committee in their requests for information.

"The Department has been working diligently to satisfy the Committee's core oversight interests,"
Weich said.

DOJ has not complied and has ignored multiple Congressional subpoenas issued, to the point DOJ officials may be held in contempt. Rep. Issa wasn't impressed with Weich's response.

"You've given us wax paper instead of white paper," Issa said, referring to 800 pages of paper so redacted, it looks like black paper instead of white, "How dare you make an opening statement of cooperation."

Fast and Furious

The Atlanta Journal - Jamie Dupree
June 15, 2011

The investigation of a U.S. Government operation that allowed guns to be sold to buyers who then funneled those weapons to Mexican drug organizations took a huge step forward today in Congress, as three federal agents said they warned superiors to stop those plans as early as 2007.

"There have been grave mistakes made in this case," said Peter J. Forcelli, a Supervisory Special Agent with Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) in Phoenix, who first raised the issue with his superiors four years ago.

"Allowing firearms to be trafficked to criminals is a dangerous and deadly strategy," Forcelli told a House Committee.

That was obvious to lawmakers, as the family members of slain Border Patrol agent Bryan Terry sat at the same witness table as Forcelli and two other ATF agents.

"I have never heard an explanation from anyone involved in Operation Fast and Furious that I believe would justice

what we did," said ATF agent John Dodson.

The story painted by the three agents made clear that this gun sales operation began in the Bush Administration and then continued in the Obama Administration, until these whistleblowers began telling their story outside of the Justice Department.

ATF agent Olindo James Casa detailed how he had raised concerns in late 2009 about the undercover gun sales, but was rebuked by superiors, who then sent out what is known as the "Schism" email.

"In essence, the e-mail was a direct threat to the Special Agents who were not in agreement" with the operation to keep their mouths shut, Casa told the House Oversight Committee.

After the agents testified, lawmakers got their chance to blast a Justice Department official over the Obama Administration's reluctance to turn over documents about the matter.

"Who authorized this program in Washington, D.C.?" asked Rep. Darrell Issa (R-CA), his voice rising as he demonstrated his frustration by waving around fully-blacked out documents turned over by the Justice Department.

"We've had to subpoena again and again," said a visibly frustrated Issa.

Assistant Attorney General Ronald Weich became a punching bag for Issa and others during his time in the witness chair, as Republicans demanded answers and received very few, getting the basic assurance that the Justice Department is investigating the matter.

Democrats meanwhile accused GOP lawmakers and Sen. Charles Grassley (R-IA) of wrongly releasing documents turned over by the Justice Department, arguing it could endanger the prosecution of the killer of agent Terry's killer.

Republicans all but accused the Justice Department - and Attorney General Eric Holder - of lying to Congress about Operation Fast and Furious.

While this operation began during the Bush Administration, the defensive nature of the Obama Administration in releasing information about it insures that Republicans and the press corps will keep after this story in coming months.

Four ATF agents contradict Justice Department account on 'Fast and Furious'

The Daily Caller – Jonathan Strong

June 15, 2011

Four Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) agents in transcribed interviews with top GOP oversight official Darrell Issa's office are contradicting the Justice Department's account of "Operation Fast and Furious," saying hundreds of weapons — including assault rifles and military-grade sniper weapons — were allowed to escape into the clutches of Mexican drug cartels in an apparently reckless investigative strategy.

Their testimony raises the question of whether Ronald Weich, a deputy to Attorney General Eric Holder, lied to congressional investigators in a Feb. 4 letter denying the allegations. Weich is testifying before Issa's committee Wednesday.

The four ATF agents describe how the weapons were tracked from sales at U.S. gun shops but not seized as is normal practice. The goal of the operation was to track the weapons as they progressed from the purchasers through criminal networks.

But two rifles involved in "Fast and Furious" were found at the scene of Border Agent Brian Terry's murder Dec. 14, 2010, apparently provoking the Justice Department to halt the operation in the aftermath of the murder. Jaime Avila, the purchaser of the guns, had been under surveillance for over a year as he illegally purchased weapons.

The ATF agents' testimony, from John Dodson, Olindo James Casa, Lawrence Alt and Peter Forceilli, adds

additional context and detail to “Fast and Furious” not previously known. The testimony is excerpted in a report from Issa released on the eve of the hearing where Weich is testifying.

Top-ranking Justice Department officials have previously denied the allegations, saying ATF agents made “every effort” to seize weapons purchased illegally. Since earlier blanket denials, however, Justice officials have since narrowed the scope of what they are denying, defining terms in ways the ATF agents say are at odds with common usage.

Issa leaks ATF emails

The Hill - Jordy Yager

June 15, 2011

The chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee released copies of redacted emails on Wednesday that detail the involvement of the head of the ATF in a controversial gun-tracking program as early as March of 2010.

The emails strike a stark contrast to letters the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) have sent to lawmakers in which they denied selling assault weapons to known and suspected straw purchasers for drug cartels and claimed that they made every effort to prevent weapons from going to Mexico.

In one of the emails, released by Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.), with the subject heading, “Director’s questions,” the supervisor of the “Fast and Furious” operation wrote to the assistant special agent in charge of Phoenix field operations with an Internet Protocol address for one of the video monitoring units in a gun store which was authorized to sell guns to the suspects.

The emails seem to indicate that ATF acting-director Kenneth Melson had asked for this information.

“With this information, acting Director Melson was able to sit at his desk in Washington and – himself – watch a live feed of the straw buyers entering the gun stores to purchase dozens of AK-47 variants,” said a Republican committee statement.

Earlier this year, in response to a letter from Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) to Melson asking him about his knowledge of the gun-tracking operation, the Justice Department wrote the senator and denied knowingly selling assault weapons to straw purchasers and stated that it made every effort to prevent weapons from going to Mexico.

In another email on March 10, 2010, the assistant special agent in charge of Phoenix field operations wrote to the supervisor of the “Fast and Furious” operation and said, “Not sure if you know, but Mr. Melson and Mr. Hoover are being briefed weekly on this investigation and the recent success with [redacted] so they are both keenly interested in case updates.”

The release of the emails come as Issa was holding a hearing on the gun-tracking program with ATF agents.

US guns fuel Mexico drug war? The politics behind the issue.

A new report shows that 70 percent of confiscated weapons submitted for tracing come from the US, but critics say the figure is politically motivated.

Christian Science Monitor - [Sara Miller Llana](#)

June 15, 2011

Mexico City

Who is supplying guns to Mexican drug traffickers?

The answer has become one of the most polemical in the gun rights debate, with Mexico blaming lax US gun laws and gun rights advocates saying that blame is misplaced.

Statistics are cited. Methodologies are dismissed.

A new report released this week by US senators has renewed the fight, with valid points coming from both sides of the divide.

The report, issued by Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D) of California, Sen. Charles Schumer (D) of New York, and Sheldon Whitehouse (D) of Rhode Island, bases its conclusions on US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) statistics. The report states that of 29,284 arms handed over for tracing by Mexican authorities in 2009-10, some 70 percent came from the US.

The senators conclude that military-style guns have “contributed to Mexico’s dangerous levels of violence,” and that legislation to tighten gun laws, like reinstating the expired Assault Weapons Ban, is in order.

Cherry-picked data?

The ATF's statistic has been controversial since it was first cited two years ago. (At that time the number was even higher, at around 90 percent. It may have dropped now because more guns are getting traced today).

Nonetheless, it only accounts for guns seized in Mexico, and of those, the ones that the Mexican government submits for tracing. Many see that as an incomplete set of data, leading them to dismiss the statistic as inaccurate.

“It is completely misleading. There is a huge population of guns that Mexicans confiscated that they don’t submit to trace to the ATF,” says Robert Farago, the managing editor of the website The Truth about Guns.

Still, it is estimated that about 30 percent of weapons seized in Mexico are submitted for tracing. And whether it is 90 percent or 70 percent that come from the US within that pool, that is still a large number of American guns circulating in Mexico.

“What is clear beyond a doubt is that there are an enormous amount of guns coming from US,” says Tom Diaz, senior policy analyst at the Violence Policy Center in Washington.

Mr. Diaz argues in the report The Militarization of the US Civilian Firearms Market that those guns are increasingly modeled after the military. He says that semiautomatic assault rifles, 50 caliber anti-armor sniper rifles, and armor-piercing handguns are the “weapons of choice” for drug organizations in Mexico.

Mr. Farago does not doubt that military-style weapons are in the hands of drug traffickers in Mexico. But he says that is because weapons from the Mexican military are seeping into drug traffickers’ hands.

Traffickers also acquire military weapons from other countries.

“Grenades and fully automatic machine guns are not sold at Bob’s gun store in Arizona,” Diaz says. “This is a distraction technique. There is not an iron river of guns from [US] gun stores.”

The newest report comes as the ATF is under fire for a sting operation that purposefully allows some automatic weapons to be smuggled south of the border so it can track them. Mexican authorities have long faulted robust American demand for drugs and lax gun laws for their woes.

Calderón: 'I accuse the US weapons industry'

Mexican President Felipe Calderón reiterated that stance bluntly this week. "I accuse the US weapons industry of [responsibility for] the deaths of thousands of people that are occurring in Mexico," Mr. Calderón said over the weekend, while on a visit to California. "It is for profit, for the profits that it makes for the weapons industry."

Diaz says the Mexican government needs to get even tougher on the US arms industry, even finding a channel to sue it. But gun rights activists have long said this is misplaced blame – that gun laws in the US are much laxer than in Mexico and yet the same levels of violence and impunity are nowhere near what Mexico is encountering: to date more than 35,000 drug-related deaths in the past four and a half years.

In fact, Farago says Mexico should loosen its restrictions on rights to bear arms, even allowing the US to supply citizens with weapons. "We should be supplying guns to Mexican citizens who cannot defend themselves," he says. "They are completely at the mercy of these drug [traffickers]."

Family of Slain Agent Seeks Answers at Gun Hearing

Wall Street Journal – Evan Perez

June 15, 2011

Family members of a U.S. border agent killed in a December shootout provided emotional testimony Wednesday before a House committee examining gun enforcement tactics that some lawmakers said allowed thousands of firearms to fall into the hands of smugglers with ties to Mexican drug cartels.

Two assault rifles purchased at a gun store that was being monitored in the federal trafficking probe, called Fast and Furious, were found at the scene of the Arizona shootout that killed agent Brian Terry. His death and allegations by whistle-blowers have prompted a growing controversy over tactics used in the investigation.

The hearing Wednesday by the Oversight and Government Reform Committee is part of the panel's investigation into how the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives ran the Fast and Furious operation.

The Phoenix ATF office led the operation in 2009-10 to monitor weapons purchases by suspected gun traffickers. The agency hoped to build a case against major arms smugglers to Mexican drug cartels. Republican lawmakers leading the probe say the ATF didn't have the means to track the guns and should have known that such tactics would backfire.

Mr. Terry's mother and sister sat in the hearing room as Mr. Terry's cousin, Robert Heyer, tearfully read a statement on behalf of the family describing the late agent's career path from U.S. Marine to local cop in Michigan, to the Border Patrol.

Mr. Heyer described the family's anguish at learning of Mr. Terry's death in a phone call in the middle of the night 10 days before Christmas. He paused repeatedly as he described the painful reminders of his death when relatives received presents he had mailed shortly before he was killed.

Mr. Heyer urged the ATF and other officials to help provide answers in the congressional probe. "We ask that if a government official made a wrong decision that they admit their error and take responsibility for his or her actions," he said.

The Justice Department has said the operation never was intended to let weapons be trafficked to Mexico. Attorney General Eric Holder was troubled by the allegations and has ordered an inspector-general investigation of the operation, the Justice Department has said.

A congressional report produced ahead of the hearing includes testimony from four Phoenix ATF agents, who described how they and other agents battled supervisors. The dissenting agents said they wanted to make arrests instead of allowing illicit guns into circulation, fearing they would lead to deaths. Supervisors insisted that the investigation proceed, aiming to trace them to weapons traffickers, the congressional report shows.

Rep. Darrell Issa of California, chairman of the House oversight committee, and Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa, the senior Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee, said their joint investigation showed that Fast and Furious wasn't just a local operation in Phoenix. "It was a conscious decision by senior officials," Mr. Grassley said. "It was briefed up to Washington, D.C. According to an internal briefing paper, Operation Fast and Furious was intentionally designed to 'allow the transfer of firearms to continue to take place.' "

Mr. Issa released ATF internal emails that identified the senior ATF officials involved, including Kenneth Melson, the ATF acting director.

One email among ATF officials describes Mr. Melson's request for the Internet address for hidden cameras that ATF planted in gun shops cooperating with the Fast and Furious probe, Mr. Issa said, citing the documents. That allowed Mr. Melson to sit at his desk and watch a live feed of suspected straw buyers—who make small purchases on behalf of gun traffickers—buying AK-47-style rifles, Mr. Issa said.

Mr. Issa told the hearing: "I hope that this bipartisan oversight effort will shed truth on this reckless program, hold those responsible to account for their decisions, and ultimately correct serious flaws in the Department of Justice so that this mistake isn't repeated."

Rep. Elijah Cummings, of Maryland, the top Democrat on the oversight panel, called the committee's findings so far "very troubling." He cited testimony that agents would take their eye off the guns they were supposed to be following. "Surveillance of suspected straw purchasers was discontinued repeatedly, seemingly for no reason, so agents could return to gun stores to start over with new suspects," he said.

ATF agents interviewed by congressional investigators described supervisors trying to tamp down agents' misgivings about the strategy to allow the weapons purchases.

Peter Forcelli, one of three ATF agents who testified Wednesday, provided a scathing assessment of the Fast and Furious operation, saying it exhibited a "colossal failure of leadership."

"Allowing firearms to be trafficked to criminals is a dangerous and deadly strategy," Mr. Forcelli testified.

Congressional report criticizes ATF gun operation

Associated Press – Pete Yost

June 15, 2011

WASHINGTON -- Three federal firearms investigators told Congress on Wednesday that they were repeatedly ordered to step aside while gun buyers in Arizona walked away with AK-47s and other high-powered weaponry headed for Mexican drug cartels in a risky U.S. law enforcement operation that went out of control.

Rep. Darrell Issa of California said leaders of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives were fully aware of the details of Operation Fast and Furious, which was designed to track small-time gun buyers to major weapons traffickers along the Southwest border.

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At a hearing before Issa's panel, Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa said "hundreds upon hundreds of weapons" destined for cartels in Mexico were purchased in Arizona gun shops.

The operation was designed to respond to criticism that the agency had focused on small-time gun arrests while major traffickers eluded prosecution.

In December, two assault rifles purchased by a now-indicted small-time buyer under scrutiny in Fast and Furious turned up at the scene of a shootout in Arizona where Customs and Border Protection agent Brian Terry was killed.

"We ask that if a government official made a wrong decision that they admit their error and take responsibility for his or her actions," Robert Heyer, the slain agent's cousin, told the committee.

"We hope that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms is forthcoming with all information" Congress is seeking.

John Dodson, an ATF agent who feared the operation would result in deaths, told the committee that "although my instincts made me want to intervene and interdict these weapons, my supervisors directed me and my colleagues not to make any stop or arrest, but rather, to keep the straw purchaser under surveillance while allowing the guns to walk."

"Allowing loads of weapons that we knew to be destined for criminals - this was the plan," said Dodson. "It was so mandated."

ATF agent Olindo James Casa said that "on several occasions I personally requested to interdict or seize firearms, but I was always ordered to stand down and not to seize the firearms."

"We were told to just fall in line," said Casa.

ATF agent Peter Forcelli said that "when I voiced surprise and concern with this tactic ... my concerns were dismissed" by superiors.

"To allow a gun to walk is idiotic This was a catastrophic disaster," said Forcelli.

U.S. agents slam gun sting effort on Mexico border

Reuters - Jeremy Pelofsky

Jun 15, 2011

WASHINGTON - U.S. firearms agents told lawmakers on Wednesday they were instructed to only watch as hundreds of guns were bought, illegally resold and sent to Mexico where drug-related violence has raged for years.

Agents for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives in Arizona told the House of Representatives Oversight Committee they were told not to arrest the so-called straw buyers and instead see where the guns went.

Republicans and Democrats on the panel expressed outrage about the ATF program -- "Operation Fast and Furious" -- and demanded answers from the Obama administration about why arrests were secondary to tracking the firearms.

"We monitored as they purchased handguns, AK-47 variants and .50 caliber rifles, almost daily at times," John Dodson, an ATF special agent in Phoenix, told the committee.

"Rather than conduct any enforcement actions, we took notes, we recorded observations, we tracked movements of these individuals, we wrote reports but nothing more."

Dodson said agents were never given reasonable answers why their activities were limited.

An ATF supervisor in Phoenix, Peter Forcelli, said some tried to raise concerns with supervisors but were rebuffed.

"My concerns were dismissed," he told the committee. "I believe that these firearms will continue to turn up at crime scenes, on both sides of the border, for years to come."

The agents complained they were ordered to break off surveillance of the firearms and instead follow the original gun purchaser rather than track where the weapons went.

Drug violence and the flow of guns over the U.S. border into Mexico has developed into a major sore point between the two countries, straining diplomatic ties and leading Mexican officials to openly criticize the United States.

THOUSANDS OF GUNS TRACED BACK TO U.S.

Of the nearly 30,000 firearms recovered in 2009 and 2010 in Mexico, where gun possession is illegal, some 70 percent were determined to have come from the United States, ATF officials told lawmakers last week.

The program has renewed the political debate over tougher gun control laws.

Republicans, who largely oppose more limits, control the House and President Barack Obama's Democrats, who generally want stricter rules, control the Senate, making it unlikely that such legislation could pass before the 2012 election.

Republicans and Democrats expressed outrage at the ATF program, particularly about two weapons being found at the scene where a U.S. Border Patrol agent, Brian Terry, was killed in a shootout with illegal immigrants.

It still has not been revealed whether either of those weapons were responsible for his death.

"What we find is that people at the local level overwhelmingly objected to this program but were assured that it was approved at the highest levels," said House Oversight Committee Chairman Darrell Issa.

A report by Issa and the top Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee, Charles Grassley, said whenever there was a shooting incident in Arizona, ATF agents feared they would be traced back to guns that were supposed to be watched.

That included the shooting in January of Democratic Representative Gabrielle Giffords, who was gravely wounded. That gun has not been linked to the ATF program.

"The allegations that have been made are very troubling and new information we have obtained raises additional concerns about the roles of various actors involved in these incidents," said Elijah Cummings, the top Democrat on the panel.

Republicans on the panel have demanded documents and information about the program from the Justice Department, which includes the ATF, but the Obama administration has resisted pending its own investigation and prosecutions.

The Justice Department's inspector general is looking into any impropriety in the program. Prosecutors have also brought charges related to the death of the border patrol agent.

Congressional Report Slams ATF's 'Fast And Furious' Operation

NPR - Mark Memmott

June 15, 2011

Two leading congressional critics of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives' so-called Operation Fast and Furious have issued a scathing report on the program that allegedly let hundreds of guns go from the U.S. to Mexico — with deadly results.

The "joint staff report" prepared for Rep. Darrell Issa (R-CA) and Sen. Charles Grassley (R-IO) and released today concludes that "the death of Border Agent Brian Terry was likely a preventable tragedy." You can [read the report here](#).

As NPR's Carrie Johnson [previously reported](#), Terry's murder in Mexico last year "touched off a scandal that's now reverberating in Washington" because weapons found at the scene were traced to Fast and Furious.

During that operation, as Carrie has written, federal investigators "wanted to follow the flow of guns from the U.S. into the hands of deadly Mexican drug cartels." So, in what's become known as "gunwalking," they monitored illegal gun purchases — but allowed the buyers to walk away with the weapons.

Issa, who chairs the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, is holding a hearing on Operation Fast and Furious today. Carrie will have more on today's *All Things Considered*. [Click here](#) to find an NPR station that broadcasts or streams the show.

Weapons smuggled in US sting linked to deaths: report

AFP

June 15, 2011

WASHINGTON — Weapons smuggled into Mexico as part of a US sting operation -- and then lost -- have been linked to numerous killings, including that of an American federal agent, a congressional report disclosed Wednesday.

The report found that the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) lost track of the weapons after allowing them to be smuggled into Mexico under an operation called "Fast and Furious."

"This hapless plan allowed the guns in question to disappear out of the agency's view," said the report by Representative Darrel Issa and Senator Charles Grassley, both Republicans.

"As a result, this chain of events inevitably placed guns in the hands of violent criminals. ATF would only see these guns again after they turned up at a crime scene. Many of these recoveries involved loss of life," it said.

Two of the weapons were found at the scene of the killing of Brian Terry, a border patrol agent who was shot and killed in Arizona December 14 while trying to apprehend armed men preying on illegal immigrants.

Terry's family attended the hearing at which the report was made public.

The ATF program, which angered Mexico when it came to light, allowed hundreds of weapons to be smuggled into Mexico between 2009 and 2010 as part of a plan to capture major arms traffickers.

"ATF never achieved the laudable goal of dismantling a drug cartel. ATF never even got close," the report said.

Instead, it said, "Operation Fast and Furious contributed to the increasing violence and deaths in Mexico."

Issa said the program was approved at the highest levels of the US government, and that those responsible should be held accountable.

President Barack Obama has said neither he nor Attorney General Eric Holder authorized the program and promised that consequences would flow from a Justice Department investigation.

Did Holder deputy lie to Congress about Operation Fast and Furious?; Update: Issa releases e-mails

Hot Air - Ed Morrissey

June 15, 2011

The House Oversight Committee has released interviews with four ATF agents indicate that a top official in the Department of Justice may have lied to, or at the least misled, Congress on a controversial operation that put guns in the hands of Mexican drug cartels, one of which was used to kill a Border Patrol agent. Ronald Welch, a Deputy Attorney General under Eric Holder, assured Congress in writing that the ATF and Department of Justice "made every effort" seize all illegally-purchased weapons. However, the ATF agents testified that the ATF and DoJ deliberately allowed hundreds of such weapons to cross the border as part of Operation Fast and Furious:

Dodson, Casa, Alt and Forcelli say they were instructed to watch weapons purchased illegally en route to criminal networks but not seize the weapons as they had been trained. ...

Dodson estimates 1,730 weapons escaped to the clutches of Mexican drug cartels throughout the lifespan of "Fast and Furious." Many were later recovered at the scene of violent crimes.

“This guy comes in, buys 10, 15, 20 AKs or ... a 22-year-old girl walks in and dumps \$10,000 on ... AK-47s in a day, when she is driving a beat up car that doesn't have enough metal to hold hubcaps on it. They knew what was going on. The 'may have facilitated' to me is kind of erroneous. We did facilitate it. How are we not responsible for the ultimate outcome of these [g]uns?” Dodson said.

The agents said they complained vociferously about the operation to superiors. Eventually, a “schism” between team members developed over whether the tactics being used were wise or even legal.

When the agents raised objections to the wisdom *and* legality of the operation, they were met with a rather pointed response:

David Voth, the team's supervisor, sent a March 12, 2010 email to the team, saying the tactics of “Fast and Furious” were backed by “HQ.”

“Whether you care or not people of rank and authority at HQ are paying close attention to this case and they also believe we...are doing what they envisioned the Southwest Border Groups doing. It may sound cheesy but we are 'The tip of the ATF spear' when it comes to Southwest Border Firearms Trafficking,” Voth wrote.

If the agents didn't like it, “Maybe the Maricopa County Jail is hiring detention officers and you can get paid \$30,000 (instead of \$100,000) to serve lunch to inmates all day,” Voth wrote.

Dodson said he was told “the U.S. Attorney is on board, and it was Mr. [Emory] Hurley, and they say there is nothing illegal going on.”

Agents clearly didn't agree, and accurately predicted the outcome of allowing the weapons to cross the border:

ATF agents interviewed by congressional investigators described supervisors trying to tamp down agents' misgivings about the strategy to allow the weapons purchases.

Larry Alt, an ATF agent, told investigators agents opposed the weapons sales as early as December 2009 and wanted to arrest straw purchasers, who are paid to buy guns for others. Mr. Alt said he agreed with a fellow agent who expressed the view that “someone was going to die.”

Supervisors responded by saying the operation was “sanctioned” by higher-ups. They also cited Mexico's surging drug violence—187 murders in Sinaloa state in one month— as reason for the strategy.

“I believe we are righteous in our plan to dismantle this entire [trafficking] organization and to rush in to arrest any one person without taking into account the entire scope of the conspiracy would be ill advised. ...,” wrote David Voth, an ATF supervisor who was leading Fast and Furious, to fellow agents in an April 2010 email cited in the 51-page report scheduled to be released Wednesday.

Voth scolded agents for their dissent in another e-mail and told them that “higher-ups” were watching:

“We are all entitled to our respective (albeit different) opinions however we all need to get along and realize that we have a mission to accomplish.”

He added: “Whether you care or not people of rank and authority at HQ are paying close attention to this case and they also believe we are doing what they envisioned.”

And yet, when Congress demanded answers, Welch insisted that nothing of the kind had happened — at least at first:

Initially, top Justice Department officials denied weapons were allowed to escape into criminal networks.

“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,” a Feb. 4 letter from Welch to Issa and Iowa Republican Sen. Charles Grassley said.

“ATF makes every effort to interdict weapons that have been purchased illegally and prevent their transportation to Mexico,” the letter said.

Not only was “every effort” clearly *not* made, the ATF was *deliberately* refusing to interdict hundreds of weapons. The DoJ later attempted to walk back this unequivocal denial by stating that they only interdicted the purchasers *carrying* weapons across the border, which would make the earlier letter entirely irrelevant.

Welch faces the Oversight panel later today to answer questions on this operation and his response to Congress. If he doesn't come up with something better, expect a contempt citation from the House.

Update: I got the release from Oversight, but I'm going to send you to Michelle Malkin on the background. The Boss Emeritus has images of the e-mails themselves, and since she's been a stalwart on this story from the beginning, she has important context as well:

- The first e-mail from March 10, 2010, to Operation Fast and Furious Group VII Leader David Voth indicates that the two most senior leaders in ATF, Acting Director Kenneth Melson, and Deputy Director Billy Hoover, were “being briefed weekly on” Operation Fast and Furious. The document shows that both Melson and Hoover were “keenly interested in case updates.”
- A second e-mail from March 12, 2010, shows that Deputy Assistant Director for Field Operations William McMahon was so excited about Fast and Furious that he received a special briefing on the program in Phoenix – scheduled for a mere 45 minutes after his plane landed.
- A third – and perhaps the most disturbing – e-mail from April 12, 2010, indicates that Acting Director Melson was very much in the weeds with Operation Fast and Furious. After a detailed briefing of the program by the ATF Phoenix Field Division, Acting Director Melson had a plethora of follow-up questions that required additional research to answer. As the document indicates, Mr. Melson was interested in the IP Address for hidden cameras located inside cooperating gun shops. With this information, Acting Director Melson was able to sit at his desk in Washington and – himself – watch a live feed of the straw buyers entering the gun stores to purchase dozens of AK-47 variants.

Will the media put pressure on Obama to do something about what looks like an obvious attempt to hide information from Congress by the DoJ?

Update II: Jeff Dunetz argues that the ATF's botched operation proves the case against big-government solutions:

Operation Fast and Furious is a perfect example of what happens when government gets too big. It's objective is not to serve the people but to serve itself. This lame-brained scheme reads like a lousy buddy movie comedy, where superiors ignore the objections of their own personnel who know better, but even more importantly they ignore the black and white results of their misguided plan. Allow me to correct that, the results weren't black and white they were red, the blood of Americans, including at least one hero, Border Agent Brian Terry.

Thank God the ATF doesn't control the Navy Seals, they probably would have sent Bin Laden a box of hand grenades prior to the operation in Pakistan to capture/kill the terrorist leader.

One doesn't need to be an ATF supervisor to know that this plan, basically arming drug cartels was doomed from the start. But most of the time, logic and the federal government are mutually exclusive.

I'm not sure I entirely agree with the idea that this proves anything, especially *vis a vis* the Navy SEALs, since the military is, after all, another government operation. Border control falls squarely in the purview of the federal government, including (if not especially) arms flow. The point about unresponsiveness is well noted, but this isn't an area where private-sector alternatives will work. I think what this proves is that we need intelligent and responsive professionals in charge of legitimate government agencies, and that we don't have that at the DoJ at the moment.

The Shame Of Project Gun Runner

Houston Chronicle - Kathleen McKinley

June 15, 2011

This is a story you will be surprised you haven't heard about, but you will hear much more soon.

In a nutshell, from Yid With a Lid:

... the US government decided—in order to fight the Mexican Drug Cartels, we should arm them and let them keep their weapons once they were used in committing crimes.

.....

...the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Fireworks (ATF) to green-light Operation Fast and Furious, which resulted in the deaths of Americans via Mexican Drug Cartel assassins using American Guns. According to a new report issued by the House Oversight Committee, the plan was executed over the objections of the ATF agents involved.

*“Project Gunrunner” (A.K.A Fast and Furious) Was a project of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Fireworks In late 2009, the ATF was alerted to suspicious buys at seven gun shops in the Phoenix area. Suspicious because the buyers paid cash, sometimes brought in paper bags. And they purchased classic “weapons of choice” used by Mexican drug traffickers – semi-automatic versions of military type rifles and pistols. **According to news reports several gun shops wanted to stop the questionable sales, but Bureau encouraged them to continue.**”*

Then bad things happened:

Two of the approximately 2,000 guns that ATF let criminals walk away with were found at the murder scene of U.S. Border Patrol Agent Brian Terry in December 2010.

“ATF agents have shared chilling accounts of being ordered to stand down as criminals in Arizona walked away with guns headed for Mexican drug cartels,” said Rep. Issa. “With the clinical precision of a lab experiment, the Justice Department kept records of weapons they let walk and the crime scenes where they next appeared. To agents’ shock, preventing loss of life was not the primary concern.”

“These agents have risked their lives working for the ATF and they’ve risked their careers by coming forward to speak the truth about a dangerous strategy that was doomed from the start,” Sen. Grassley said. “The report shows the street agents’ perspective on this risky policy to let guns walk. It should help people who are wondering what really happened during Operation Fast and Furious understand why we are continuing to investigate.”

Read more of the details at the link.

There are not more details than that because the Justice Dept is refusing to release documents pertaining to “Operation Gunrunner.” House Oversight Committee Chairman Rep. Darrell Issa (R-CA.) has sent a letter to the ATF in which he threatened the federal agency with contempt proceedings if it did not produce the documents.

ATF agents were angry that they were being forced to let dangerous guns into the arms of the drug cartels in Mexico. CBS News:

50-caliber weapons are fearsome. For months, ATF agents followed 50-caliber Barrett rifles and other guns believed headed for the Mexican border, but were ordered to let them go. One distraught agent was often overheard on ATF radios begging and pleading to be allowed to intercept transports. The answer: “Negative. Stand down.”

CBS News has been told at least 11 ATF agents and senior managers voiced fierce opposition to the strategy. “It got ugly...” said one. There was “screaming and yelling” says another. A third warned: “this is crazy, somebody is gonna to get killed.”

Sure enough, the weapons soon began surfacing at crime scenes in Mexico – dozens of them sources say – including shootouts with government officials.

But this is the shocking and sickening thing:

It is important to remember that the Obama Administration and the Department of Homeland Security have implied that much of the violence in Mexico is to blame on law abiding gun shop owners who “sell to cartel members” and the Second Amendment, yet continued exposure of Operation Gun Runner shows the government approving the sales reported by shop owners to ATF, giving the green light for weapons to flow freely across the border into dangerous hands, resulting in thousands of innocent deaths in Mexico and Border Patrol Agent Brian Terry in Arizona earlier this year. ATF sat by and watched as known criminals purchased the weapons they needed to carry out lethal operations with no take downs of cartels as a result, all while using law abiding gun shop owners as a cover.

So, if one were very cynical, one would say that the Obama administration thought that if guns were found on drug cartels, then they could blame gun shop owners and call for strict gun control because of it. But just as disturbing is the fact that the Obama administration forced these agents to do things they knew, as experienced ATF agents, were wrong and dangerous.

Remember back in March when Obama wrote an Op-Ed calling for stricter gun control?

To see last month’s hearing where Attorney General Eric Holder was questioned on all this, go here.

These are serious charges. The DOJ needs to come clean and release the documents.

Cummings to hold hearing on nation's gun laws in wake of nephew's death

The Hill - Jordy Yager

June 15, 2011

Rep. Elijah Cummings (D-Md.), whose nephew was killed in a shooting Friday, sympathized with the family of a slain federal agent during Wednesday's hearing on a gun-tracking program.

Cummings, as the ranking Democrat on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, also announced plans for a separate, minority-led hearing on the nation's gun laws with witnesses of his choosing.

The move came in opening remarks of Wednesday’s hearing, which is set to examine the controversial “Fast and Furious” gun-tracking operation, which oversaw the sale of more than 1,300 firearms to known and suspected straw purchasers for drug cartels.

Cummings said he had hoped that the issue of gun laws would be addressed in Committee Chairman Rep. Dorel Issa's (R-Calif.) hearing that day.

“No legitimate examination of this issue will be complete without analyzing our nation’s gun laws, which allow tens of thousands of assault weapons to flood into Mexico from the United States every year, including fifty caliber sniper rifles, multiple AK variants, and scores of others,” said Cummings.

“In order to explore these issues further, today I am exercising my right under the Rules of the House for a minority day of hearings with several witnesses who will testify about these issues in detail. I did not think it was necessary to call these witnesses for today’s hearing, but I will work with Chairman Issa on scheduling this hearing in the near future.”

Cummings offered his condolences to the family ATF Agent Brian Terry, who was killed in a gun battle with suspected members of a drug cartel in Arizona last December. Cummings’ nephew was shot and killed in his Virginia apartment last week.

ATF chief regularly briefed on botched gun operation

L.A. Times - Brian Bennett

June 15, 2011

A federal firearms investigation that allowed weapons from the U.S. to pass into the hands of Mexican smugglers was closely monitored by the very top leaders of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, according to internal emails released today by a Congressional committee.

The head of the ATF was briefed weekly on the operation, the emails show, and had asked for access to an online video stream that showed buyers going into the gun shop that was part of the sting operation.

The operation was designed to catch top echelon drug cartel traffickers in Mexico who would ultimately receive the weapons, but agents lost track of the guns.

Two weapons sold under ATF surveillance were found at the scene of the shooting of Border Patrol Agent Brian Terry outside of Nogales, Ariz., in December.

During a hearing in Washington about the operation on Wednesday, Oversight and Government Reform Committee Chairman Darrell Issa (R-Calif.) released six emails that show that the ATF acting director Kenneth Melson was being briefed weekly on Operation Gunrunner as of March 2010.

Some information in the emails has been blacked out.

One email, from the ATF Phoenix supervisor in charge of the case, responded to five detailed questions that Melson had asked, including how to log onto a live video feed of the pole cameras installed in Arizona to capture footage of straw buyers coming into a gun shop to buy weapons for sale in Mexico.

The email, dated March 11, 2010, gave the acting director the internet protocol address, the username and the password for logging into the live feed.

A spokeswoman for ATF directed a request for comment on the emails to the Justice Department, which did not immediately respond to phone calls.

ATF agents: Border weapons operation a disaster

Associated Press – Pete Yost

June 15, 2011

WASHINGTON -- Three federal firearms investigators told a House committee on Wednesday that they were repeatedly ordered to step aside while gun buyers in Arizona walked away with AK-47s and other high-powered weaponry headed for Mexican drug cartels in a risky U.S. law enforcement operation that went out of control.

Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Calif., said leaders of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives were fully aware of the details of Operation Fast and Furious, which was designed to track small-time gun buyers to major weapons traffickers along the Southwest border.

At a hearing before the Oversight and Government Reform Committee, which Issa chairs, Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa said "hundreds upon hundreds of weapons" destined for cartels in Mexico were purchased in Arizona gun shops.

The operation was designed to respond to criticism that the agency had focused on small-time gun arrests while major traffickers eluded prosecution.

Operation Fast and Furious came to light after two assault rifles purchased by a now-indicted small-time buyer under scrutiny in the operation turned up at the scene of a shootout in Arizona where Customs and Border Protection agent Brian Terry was killed.

"We ask that if a government official made a wrong decision that they admit their error and take responsibility for his or her actions," Robert Heyer, the slain agent's cousin, told the committee. "We hope that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms is forthcoming with all information" Congress is seeking.

Issa berated one witness, Assistant Attorney General Ronald Weich, because the Justice Department - of which ATF is a component - has not turned over documents that Issa wants. Weich said the department is providing documents to the congressional panel on an ongoing basis. The congressman demanded to know who at the Justice Department authorized Operation Fast and Furious. Weich said that question is the subject of an inquiry by the department's inspector general.

John Dodson, an ATF agent who complained about Fast and Furious to Grassley's office, told the committee that "although my instincts made me want to intervene and interdict these weapons, my supervisors directed me and my colleagues not to make any stop or arrest, but rather, to keep the straw purchaser under surveillance while allowing the guns to walk."

"Allowing loads of weapons that we knew to be destined for criminals - this was the plan," said Dodson. "It was so mandated."

In one case, Dodson said, he watched a suspect receive a bag filled with cash from a third party, then proceed to a gun dealer and buy weapons with that cash and deliver them to the same unidentified third party. In that and other circumstances, his instructions were to do nothing.

"Surveillance operations like this were the rule, not the exception," said Dodson. "This was not a matter of weapons getting away from us, or allowing a few to walk so as to follow them to a much larger or more significant target."

ATF agent Olindo James Casa said that "on several occasions I personally requested to interdict or seize firearms, but I was always ordered to stand down and not to seize the firearms."

"We were told to just fall in line," said Casa.

On many occasions, "the surveillance team followed straw purchasers to Phoenix area firearms dealers and would observe the straw purchasers buy and then depart with numerous firearms in hand," said Casa. "On many of those occasions, the surveillance team would then follow the straw purchasers either to a residence, a public location or until the surveillance team was spotted by the straw purchasers. But the end result was always the same - the surveillance was terminated" by others up the chain of command.

ATF agent Peter Forcelli said that "when I voiced surprise and concern with this tactic ... my concerns were dismissed" by superiors.

"To allow a gun to walk is idiotic," said Forcelli. "This was a catastrophic disaster."

Forcelli said that "based upon my conversations with agents who assisted in this case, surveillance on individuals who had acquired weapons was often terminated far from the Mexican border." He said that while case agents believed that the weapons were destined for Mexico, "the potential exists that many were sent with cartel drugs to other points within the United States."

Lawmakers zero in on ATF gun trafficking operation

CNN

June 15, 2011

WASHINGTON -- A controversial strategy by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives to link gun

buyers in the United States to Mexican drug cartels will be scrutinized Wednesday at a Congressional hearing.

The House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform wants to pin down who authorized the strategy and who knew about it, Chairman Darrell Issa, R-California, said.

In a report released Tuesday, Issa and Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, described the strategy, known as Operation Fast and Furious, as a "reckless investigative technique."

The operation focused on following so-called "straw purchasers," or people who legally bought weapons that were then transferred to criminals and destined for Mexico. Instead of intercepting the weapons when they switched hands, Operation Fast and Furious called for ATF agents to let the guns "walk" and wait for them to surface in Mexico, the report said.

The idea was that once the weapons in Mexico were traced back to the straw purchasers, the entire arms smuggling network could be brought down. Instead, the report argues, letting the weapons slip into the wrong hands was a deadly miscalculation that resulted in preventable deaths, including that of Border Patrol Agent Brian Terry.

Terry was killed last year just north of the Mexican border in Arizona after he confronted a group of bandits believed to be preying on illegal immigrants.

Terry's widow is among those scheduled to testify Wednesday.

Assistant Attorney General Ronald Welch has said that the allegation the ATF knowingly allowed the sale of assault weapons to a straw purchaser who then transported them into Mexico is "false."

Issa: Dems trying to obstruct "gunwalking" probe

CBS

June 15, 2011

In riveting testimony on Capitol Hill Tuesday, one federal agent stated simply, "Someone was going to die."

And a federal agent did - from guns supplied in the so-called "gunwalking" scandal that CBS News first reported.

Those hearings, involving the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), were to resume Wednesday.

CBS News Investigative Correspondent Sharyl Attkisson - who broke the story in February - reported on "The Early Show" Wednesday that three sitting ATF special agents who helped blow the whistle on the controversial operation were slated to be the first to testify at Wednesday's session.

It's been three months since ATF Special Agent John Dodson first told CBS News that his own agency let thousands of weapons "walk" onto the streets - many of those guns made their way into the hands of Mexican drug cartels.

Dodson told CBS News, "I'm boots on the ground in Phoenix telling ya we've been doing it every day since I've been here. Here I am. Tell me I didn't do the things that I did. Tell me you didn't order me to do the things I did. Tell me it didn't happen. Now you have a name on it, you have a face to put with it. Here I am. Someone now - tell me it didn't happen."

Since then, Congressional investigators have interviewed Dodson and other ATF agents and Phoenix-area gun dealers - who claim ATF urged them to sell to suspicious characters - a strategy apparently aimed to get at cartel kingpins behind the escalating drug violence in Mexico.

U.S. security expert Mike Balboni told CBS News, "The people you want to get to are the people who are able to coordinate and finance these types of operations. They're the folks who will stay around. If you take them, you really, it's basically, you want to take out a terror agency? Strike at the head of the snake."

Whatever the intentions, many insiders claim the gun-walking was wildly dangerous and irresponsible.

Last night, congressional investigators released a lengthy narrative of the allegations, pulling from documents and testimony collected behind closed doors since the first CBS News first report.

The congressional report claims there was a "shift in strategy" in the fall of 2009 that led to the gun-walking and "was known and authorized at the highest levels of the Justice Department."

CBS News has learned that one ATF official told investigators the direction came in a memo issued by then Deputy Attorney General David Ogden. But Ogden told CBS News his memo made no specific mention of gun-walking, and that he didn't advocate or know about it. Ogden left the Department of Justice in February of last year, just a few months into the controversial operation.

President Obama has said neither he nor his top Justice Department official approved it, either.

Mr. Obama said, "Well, first of all, I did not authorize it. Uh, Eric Holder, the attorney general, did not authorize it. There may be a situation here (in) which a serious mistake was made, and if that's the case, then we'll find out and we'll hold somebody accountable."

The congressional report states that, less than two months into the operation, agents "believed there was already enough information to arrest the ... purchasers, try to flip them, and begin working up the chain with an eye toward the 'bigger fish' in the cartels."

But instead, Attkisson reported, ATF allowed suspects to continue buying and transferring assault weapons - sometimes 40 at a time - for more than a year. All the while, ATF collected reports of the guns turning up at cartel crime scenes in Mexico and the U.S.

On "The Early Show" Wednesday, Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Calif., chairman of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, which is holding the hearing in this case, called the ATF operation a "failed program from the planning on."

Issa said the Department of Justice (DOJ) and ATF have not been forthcoming about the case, until very recently.

"They've really stonewalled this," he said. "They used the minority (members of) the committee to try to obstruct it. What's beginning to happen is somebody must have figured out this investigation can't end until, at the highest level, including the president, they say, 'This is not a may-have-been. ... This is a bad practice,' and this has to, we have to have assurances this will never happen again."

Co-anchor Erica Hill noted that the DOJ and ATF are expressing concern that, if they disclose certain information, it could perhaps compromise other investigations, specifically perhaps even the trial of the trafficker accused of buying guns, which were found at the sight of the killing of border patrol agent Brian Terry. On Monday, Rep. Elijah Cummings, Hill pointed out, wrote to Issa, saying he should hold off until criminal prosecution is complete.

But Issa said the letter shows how the Democrats are trying to obstruct the investigation on behalf of the president and his administration.

Issa said, "They may not realize how absurd it is to say that we're obstructing. Understand, a man was killed, Brian Terry. He was killed with guns that were, in fact, supplied by the government.

That doesn't change the trial of the murder. The trial of the murder will have no bearing. It doesn't matter where he got the gun from. He's a murderer."

Issa continued, "What we have to ask is why is it the president says something may have gone wrong, and months go

by and they're not saying somebody at the highest levels, the levels in which this was funded, coordinated and authorized; nobody has lost their job. There's been no looking at Justice. There's only been pushing it down and saying, 'Well, you know, this was a rogue operation.' It wasn't a rogue operation. The people they want to accuse of being rogues are the people who came forward including today's witnesses, who are going to say this was wrong and we've got the proof we kept saying it was wrong, while the (authorities) kept pushing this investigation."

Hill asked if Issa ultimately wants "heads to roll" following an investigation.

She said, "You want someone to take responsibility, is that correct?"

Issa said the Terry's family deserves a full understanding of how their family member was killed.

He added, "Beyond that, what we need to know, and they need to know is that this won't happen again. If there's been judgment this bad, this obviously bad - this is beyond Iran-Contra stupid - because they didn't even have a safeguard planned in this. If they do not say, 'These people had this bad judgment, they no longer work in an area in which they can apply that kind of bad judgment,' then no, we can't let go."

"This is one of those opportunities for the administration to lead and say, 'Look, we're going to get anyone who is involved in authorizing this, if their judgment is involved ' - which it would have been and it was bad judgment, 'they can't do this job anymore,'" Issa said. "That's all we're asking. We're asking to make sure this doesn't happen again and (Terry's) family deserves that, too."