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ATF's 'Fast and Furious' gun-tracking program prompts gun laws debate

By Jordy Yager - 06/30/11 05:45 AM ET

Rep. Elijah Cummings (D-Md.) released a report Thursday pushing lawmakers to strengthen the country's gun laws and regulations to better equip law enforcement agents in their fight against illegal weapons trafficking.

The 26-page report, titled, "Outgunned: Law Enforcement Agents Warn Congress They Lack Adequate Tools to Counter Illegal Firearms Trafficking," was released ahead of Cummings's House Oversight and Government Reform Committee hearing on Thursday.

The hearing is set to look at gun laws in light of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives's (ATF) controversial "Fast and Furious" gun-tracking operation, which could have contributed to the death of Border Patrol agent Brian Terry. "The allegations regarding Fast and Furious are serious and deserve a thorough, even-handed, and full investigation," said Cummings, the committee's ranking Democrat, in a statement.

"But we cannot ignore the broader problem and its devastating effects on both sides of the border. Real oversight requires us not just to hold hearings, but to convert our findings into action. This report recommends real solutions that will help improve the lives of Americans and our Mexican neighbors and allies."

The "Fast and Furious" operation authorized the sale of thousands of weapons to known and suspected straw purchasers for members of Mexican drug cartels with the hope of dismantling the trafficking routes and prosecuting those involved. But officials did not provide adequate surveillance of the guns and soon lost track of them, according to ATF testimony.

In the report, which has a picture of a giant .50-caliber rifle on its cover, Cummings recommended increasing criminal penalties for illegal straw purchasers, saying that an ATF special agent told the committee that convicted straw purchasers typically only receive probation. If the punishment was made stronger, officials could use the threat of it to leverage more cooperation from the accused straw purchaser, the agent said.

The report also recommended enacting a statute that would officially criminalize unlicensed gun trafficking. Citing a committee interview with another ATF agent, the report states that under current law, officials are forced to try and charge accused gun traffickers with paperwork violations.

The report's final recommendation was to require gun dealers to report the sale of multiple long guns, in addition to current reporting requirements that cover sales of two or more handguns in a five-day period.

Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) is set to testify on Thursday along with a former ATF official, an assistant Illinois attorney supervisor and several scholars and pro-gun reform advocates.

Schumer and fellow members of the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, Sens. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) and Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.), issued a similar report earlier this month on gun trafficking between the U.S. and Mexico.

Among other recommendations, Schumer's report pushed for Congress to enact legislation requiring people to undergo background checks when purchasing firearms at a gun show.

Source:

<http://thehill.com/homenews/house/169145-fast-and-furious-program-prompts-gun-laws-debate>