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FYI

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Gun Sting Surprise

Embattled ATF director Kenneth Melson gave a surprise July 4 interview to Congress, disclosing new lapses in a bungled gun sting that allowed U.S. guns to be trafficked to Mexican drug gangs, John Solomon reports exclusively.

by [John Solomon](#) | July 6, 2011 12:47 AM EDT

In a secret deposition on the Fourth of July, the embattled head of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives confirmed to congressional investigators new potential lapses in a bungled U.S. gun trafficking sting that has stirred controversy on both sides of the Mexican border, according to people familiar with the interview.

While many Americans celebrated over barbecues and fireworks, acting ATF director Kenneth Melson arrived Monday with a private attorney on Capitol Hill for the interview, the sources said, speaking only on the condition of anonymity.

During hours of questioning, Melson told investigators for the Senate Judiciary Committee and the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee that he has recently learned that other federal agencies may have withheld crucial information about possible drug cartel connections to the gun trafficking ring that his agency had tried to crack during a 15-month operation that used controversial tactics, the sources said.

Melson is the highest-ranking official to testify in the congressional inquiry into why an ATF gun trafficking operation codenamed "Fast and Furious" let suspected straw buyers purchase semiautomatic weapons at U.S. gun stores with the expectation they would flow south of the border into Mexico's raging drug and gun wars.

His testimony about possible lapses in information sharing among the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and ATF in the war on drugs sounded eerily similar to communication breakdowns that hampered the government's ability to piece together prior warning signs before the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks, the sources said.

Sen. Charles Grassley (R-IA), the ranking member on the Judiciary Committee, and House Oversight and Government Reform Chairman Darrell Issa (R-CA) sent a letter late Tuesday to Attorney General Eric Holder laying out concerns raised by Melson's testimony, the sources said.

Semi-automatic weapons for sale at Texas Gun, one of the 6,700 gun dealers located near the 2,000 miles long

And amid rumors and media speculation that Melson could soon be removed from his job, the two Republican lawmakers told Holder they thought any immediate personnel action against the acting ATF chief would be imprudent given the nature of information he has just disclosed, the sources said.

A longtime career federal official, Melson serves in a political appointment as the acting head of ATF and thus does not enjoy the same whistleblower protections as civil servants. The lawmakers' letter was designed to serve notice that Congress now considers Melson a key witness in their investigation of the bungled gun sting, the sources said.

The ATF boss had agreed late last month to be interviewed by congressional investigators and a deposition was slated for mid- to late July. But in conversations over the long holiday weekend, Melson agreed to move up the interview, the sources said.

Frontline agents have already told Congress they strongly objected to instructions to let the straw buyers walk off with gun purchases without interdicting the weapons, but they were overruled by superiors in the Phoenix ATF office.

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Melson said even he didn't know about the specific orders to let straw buyers walk off with guns until after the controversy erupted.

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Over 15 months, ATF allowed more than 1,700 weapons to flow into the hands of suspected straw buyers for the Mexican drug cartels, and nearly 800 showed up in subsequent criminal activity on both sides of the border, including two at the slaying of a U.S. border agent in December and more than 300 at Mexican crime scenes.

The tactics used in the sting have been decried by Mexican authorities angry that U.S. officials knowingly let weapons flow into their country, and President Obama has said it appears some serious mistakes may have been made.

Holder, the attorney general, has ordered an internal investigation into the tactics and ordered ATF to interdict all weapons involving suspected straw buyers going forward. Dual investigations in the House and Senate have added to the political pressures.

On Tuesday, White House press secretary Jay Carney was repeatedly pressed by a reporter for ABC News about what action Obama might take in the matter. Carney acknowledged that “obviously it's a matter of concern and that's why there's an investigation” but declined to be more specific.

“I think you could assume that the president takes this very seriously,” Carney said.

Congressional investigators have long wanted to talk to Melson to determine who above him knew about the investigation or approved of the tactics.

In his interview, Melson said most of the operational decisions for the Fast and Furious operation were approved by the U.S. Attorney's Office in Phoenix, which was leading a special strike force on gun trafficking, and that even he didn't know about the specific orders to let straw buyers walk off with guns until after the controversy erupted, according to the sources.

He told the investigators he has subsequently learned that ATF agents during the operation did observe straw buyers transferring guns they had purchased to third parties, a possible legal violation, but did not interdict the weapons at the instructions of their immediate supervisors, the sources added.

Under questioning, Melson confirmed information the congressional investigators had received elsewhere that DEA

and FBI had information about possible cartel connections to the gun trafficking ring under investigation but did not share it with ATF at the time. He expressed his own concerns about the flow of information from other agencies during a critical time in the war against Mexican border violence, the sources said.

Congressional investigators now want to know whether any of the players belatedly disclosed to the ATF had been working as assets or informants for other federal agencies, the sources said.

Melson also disclosed the existence of documents about the ATF case that have not yet been turned over to congressional investigators, the sources added.

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