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Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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March 16, 2011

Mr. Kenneth E. Melson
Acting Director
Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives
99 New York Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20226

Dear Acting Director Melson:

Recent media reports have raised grave questions about your department's handling of operations involving gun trafficking into Mexico. In the aftermath of the tragic killings of Border Patrol Agent Brian Terry and Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agent Jaime Zapata, it is imperative that you act decisively to assuage the public's deep suspicions that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) has a policy of permitting – and even encouraging – the movement of guns into Mexico by straw purchasers. The presence of these guns may have subsequently led to the deaths of hundreds of people on both sides of the border, including Agents Terry and Zapata.¹

It has been brought to my attention that you are not cooperating with congressional inquiries about Project Gunrunner and Operation Fast and Furious. Last week, Senator Charles Grassley expressed frustration at ATF's responsiveness in a letter to the Department of Justice (DOJ): "I'm still asking questions and we're getting the runaround from the Justice Department, [t]hey're stonewalling. And the longer the wait, the more they fight, the more egg that they're going to have on their face."²

Operation Fast and Furious is part of ATF's Project Gunrunner program designed to prevent illegal guns from crossing the border into Mexico. ATF implemented the plan in June 2007 and outlined four key areas of Gunrunner: expansion of gun tracing in Mexico, international coordination, domestic activities, and intelligence.

¹ Kim Murphy and Ken Ellingwood, *Mexico Lawmakers Demand Answers about Guns Smuggled under ATF's Watch*, L.A. TIMES, Mar. 11, 2011, <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-naw-mexico-guns-20110311,0,6476764,full.story>.

² William Lajeunesse, *ATF, DOJ Launch Damage Control Effort over Growing Project Gunrunner Scandal*, FOXNEWS, Mar. 9, 2011, <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2011/03/09/project-gun-runner-scandal-border/?test=latestnewsrunner> Scandal.

A November 2010 DOJ Office of the Inspector General (OIG) report detailed many shortcomings with the program, especially its inability to find and arrest higher-level traffickers.³ With direct approval from ATF headquarters in Washington, a special ATF strike force let federally licensed gun shops sell about 1765 firearms to straw buyers for the drug cartels over a 15 month span beginning in October 2009.⁴ Some 797 of the guns were recovered as a result of criminal activity on both sides of the border, including two at the site of the killing of Agent Terry.

At the same time of the release of the OIG report – and perhaps influenced by it – ATF formalized its policy of letting American guns reach the drug cartels.⁵ Field agents vociferously objected, aghast at the prospect of high-caliber weapons being allowed to enter Mexico.⁶ Senior Agent John Dodson was one of those agents who came forward to complain that the ATF had allowed the guns to be “walked” into Mexico.⁷ ATF even videotaped suspected drug cartel suppliers as they loaded AK-47 type assault rifles into their cars and permitted them to transport those firearms across the border.⁸ ATF officials failed to report this to Mexican authorities⁹ and eventually lost track of hundreds of these guns.¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, these weapons began showing up at crime scenes both in Mexico and the U.S. Notably on December 14, 2010, two “walked” rifles turned up at Agent Terry’s murder site.

Senator Grassley requested specific documents about this policy but, thus far, has received nothing from ATF or DOJ. In fact, Special Agent In Charge (SAC) William D. Newell has steadfastly denied that this policy even exists, as has DOJ.¹¹ When confronted by documentary evidence from Senator Grassley’s office, however, Attorney General Holder asked the Justice Department’s Office of Inspector General (DOJ-OIG) to conduct a review. Such a review by the Acting Inspector General, however, is inadequate. As Senator Grassley wrote to Kevin Perkins, Chair of the Integrity Committee of the Council of Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency, “the DOJ-OIG does not appear to be completely disinterested in the outcome of its review. Without a greater level of independence, it will be difficult for the public to have faith in the impartiality and integrity of the result.”¹²

³ Department of Justice Office of Inspector General, Review of ATF’s Project Gunrunner, Evaluation and Inspection Report I-2011-001(Nov. 2010), <http://www.justice.gov/oig/reports/ATF/e1101.pdf>.

⁴ John Solomon, David Heath, and Gordon Whitkin, *ATF Let Hundreds of U.S. Weapons Fall into Hands of Suspected Mexican Gunrunners*, CENTER FOR PUBLIC INTEGRITY, Mar 3, 2011, <http://www.publicintegrity.org/articles/entry/2976/>.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Sharyl Atkisson, *Agent: I Was Ordered To Let U.S. Guns into Mexico*, CBS NEWS, Mar. 3, 2011, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/03/03/eveningnews/main20039031.shtml>.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Murphy & Ellingwood, *supra* note 1.

¹¹ Solomon, *et al.*, *supra* note 4.

¹² Letter from Sen. Charles Grassley, Ranking Member, S. Jud. Comm., to Kevin L. Perkins, Chair, Integrity Comm., Council of Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency (Mar. 8, 2011).

I wholeheartedly agree with this sentiment. Given the entanglement of the DOJ-OIG report with the policy change, it has become clear that the Acting Inspector General cannot conduct an objective and independent inquiry sufficient to foster public confidence. Only a full congressional investigation can achieve this result and restore the public's faith in the workings of the ATF. Therefore, I am requesting that you provide the following documents and information:

1. Documents and communications relating to the genesis of Project Gunner and Operation Fast and Furious, and any memoranda or reports involving any changes to either program at or near the time of the release of the DOJ-OIG report about Project Gunrunner in November 2010.
2. A list of individuals responsible for authorizing the decision to "walk" guns to Mexico in order to follow them and capture a "bigger fish."
3. Following the fatal shooting of Agent Brian Terry, did ATF conduct an investigation of the circumstances of his killing? Did you determine whether the two guns found at the crime scene were permitted to cross into Mexico?
4. Is ATF aware what weapon was responsible for the death of Agent Brian Terry?
5. All documents, including e-mails, relating to communications between the ATF and the Federal Firearms Licensee (FFL) who sold weapons to Jaime Avila, including any Report of Investigation (ROI) or other records relating to a December 17, 2009 meeting "to discuss his role as an FFL during this investigation."
6. A copy of the presentation, approximately 200 pages long, that the Group 7 Supervisor made to officials at ATF headquarters in the spring of 2010.
7. All documents, including e-mails, relating to communications regarding Operation Fast and Furious between ATF headquarters and Special Agent in Charge (SAC) William D. Newell, Assistant Special Agents in Charge Jim Needles and George Gillette, Group Supervisor David Voth, or any Case Agent from November 1, 2009 to the present. The response to this request should include a memorandum, approximately 30 pages long, from SAC Newell to ATF headquarters following the arrest of Jaime Avila and the death of Agent Brian Terry.
8. All documents and communications related to complaints or objections by ATF agents in Phoenix about letting straw buyers with American guns enter Mexico.

The Committee on Oversight and Government Reform is the principal oversight Committee of the House of Representatives and may at "any time" investigate "any matter" as set forth in House Rule X.

Mr. Kenneth E. Melson

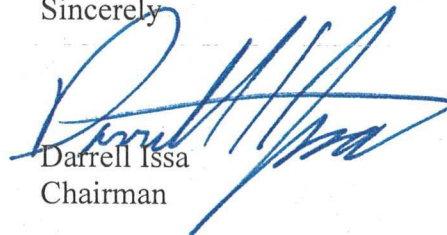
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We request that you provide the requested documents and information as soon as possible, but no later than 5:00 p.m. on March 30, 2011. When producing documents to the Committee, please deliver production sets to the Majority Staff in Room 2157 of the Rayburn House Office Building and the Minority Staff in Room 2471 of the Rayburn House Office Building. The Committee prefers, if possible, to receive all documents in electronic format. An attachment to this letter provides additional information about responding to the Committee's request.

If you have any questions about this request, please contact Ashok Pinto or Henry Kerner of the Committee Staff at (202) 225-5074. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Darrell Issa", is written over a horizontal line. The signature is stylized and cursive.

Darrell Issa
Chairman

Enclosure

cc: The Honorable Elijah E. Cummings, Ranking Minority Member

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Responding to Committee Document Requests

1. In complying with this request, you should produce all responsive documents that are in your possession, custody, or control, whether held by you or your past or present agents, employees, and representatives acting on your behalf. You should also produce documents that you have a legal right to obtain, that you have a right to copy or to which you have access, as well as documents that you have placed in the temporary possession, custody, or control of any third party. Requested records, documents, data or information should not be destroyed, modified, removed, transferred or otherwise made inaccessible to the Committee.
2. In the event that any entity, organization or individual denoted in this request has been, or is also known by any other name than that herein denoted, the request shall be read also to include that alternative identification.
3. The Committee's preference is to receive documents in electronic form (i.e., CD, memory stick, or thumb drive) in lieu of paper productions.
4. Documents produced in electronic format should also be organized, identified, and indexed electronically.
5. Electronic document productions should be prepared according to the following standards:
 - (a) The production should consist of single page Tagged Image File ("TIF"), files accompanied by a Concordance-format load file, an Opticon reference file, and a file defining the fields and character lengths of the load file.
 - (b) Document numbers in the load file should match document Bates numbers and TIF file names.
 - (c) If the production is completed through a series of multiple partial productions, field names and file order in all load files should match.

6. Documents produced to the Committee should include an index describing the contents of the production. To the extent more than one CD, hard drive, memory stick, thumb drive, box or folder is produced, each CD, hard drive, memory stick, thumb drive, box or folder should contain an index describing its contents.
7. Documents produced in response to this request shall be produced together with copies of file labels, dividers or identifying markers with which they were associated when they were requested.
8. When you produce documents, you should identify the paragraph in the Committee's request to which the documents respond.
9. It shall not be a basis for refusal to produce documents that any other person or entity also possesses non-identical or identical copies of the same documents.
10. If any of the requested information is only reasonably available in machine-readable form (such as on a computer server, hard drive, or computer backup tape), you should consult with the Committee staff to determine the appropriate format in which to produce the information.
11. If compliance with the request cannot be made in full, compliance shall be made to the extent possible and shall include an explanation of why full compliance is not possible.
12. In the event that a document is withheld on the basis of privilege, provide a privilege log containing the following information concerning any such document: (a) the privilege asserted; (b) the type of document; (c) the general subject matter; (d) the date, author and addressee; and (e) the relationship of the author and addressee to each other.
13. If any document responsive to this request was, but no longer is, in your possession, custody, or control, identify the document (stating its date, author, subject and recipients) and explain the circumstances under which the document ceased to be in your possession, custody, or control.
14. If a date or other descriptive detail set forth in this request referring to a document is inaccurate, but the actual date or other descriptive detail is known to you or is otherwise apparent from the context of the request, you should produce all documents which would be responsive as if the date or other descriptive detail were correct.
15. The time period covered by this request is included in the attached request. To the extent a time period is not specified, produce relevant documents from January 1, 2009 to the present.
16. This request is continuing in nature and applies to any newly-discovered information. Any record, document, compilation of data or information, not produced because it has not been located or discovered by the return date, shall be produced immediately upon subsequent location or discovery.

17. All documents shall be Bates-stamped sequentially and produced sequentially.
18. Two sets of documents shall be delivered, one set to the Majority Staff and one set to the Minority Staff. When documents are produced to the Committee, production sets shall be delivered to the Majority Staff in Room 2157 of the Rayburn House Office Building and the Minority Staff in Room 2471 of the Rayburn House Office Building.
19. Upon completion of the document production, you should submit a written certification, signed by you or your counsel, stating that: (1) a diligent search has been completed of all documents in your possession, custody, or control which reasonably could contain responsive documents; and (2) all documents located during the search that are responsive have been produced to the Committee.

Definitions

1. The term "document" means any written, recorded, or graphic matter of any nature whatsoever, regardless of how recorded, and whether original or copy, including, but not limited to, the following: memoranda, reports, expense reports, books, manuals, instructions, financial reports, working papers, records, notes, letters, notices, confirmations, telegrams, receipts, appraisals, pamphlets, magazines, newspapers, prospectuses, inter-office and intra-office communications, electronic mail (e-mail), contracts, cables, notations of any type of conversation, telephone call, meeting or other communication, bulletins, printed matter, computer printouts, teletypes, invoices, transcripts, diaries, analyses, returns, summaries, minutes, bills, accounts, estimates, projections, comparisons, messages, correspondence, press releases, circulars, financial statements, reviews, opinions, offers, studies and investigations, questionnaires and surveys, and work sheets (and all drafts, preliminary versions, alterations, modifications, revisions, changes, and amendments of any of the foregoing, as well as any attachments or appendices thereto), and graphic or oral records or representations of any kind (including without limitation, photographs, charts, graphs, microfiche, microfilm, videotape, recordings and motion pictures), and electronic, mechanical, and electric records or representations of any kind (including, without limitation, tapes, cassettes, disks, and recordings) and other written, printed, typed, or other graphic or recorded matter of any kind or nature, however produced or reproduced, and whether preserved in writing, film, tape, disk, videotape or otherwise. A document bearing any notation not a part of the original text is to be considered a separate document. A draft or non-identical copy is a separate document within the meaning of this term.
2. The term "communication" means each manner or means of disclosure or exchange of information, regardless of means utilized, whether oral, electronic, by document or otherwise, and whether in a meeting, by telephone, facsimile, email, regular mail, telexes, releases, or otherwise.
3. The terms "and" and "or" shall be construed broadly and either conjunctively or disjunctively to bring within the scope of this request any information which might

otherwise be construed to be outside its scope. The singular includes plural number, and vice versa. The masculine includes the feminine and neuter genders.

4. The terms "person" or "persons" mean natural persons, firms, partnerships, associations, corporations, subsidiaries, divisions, departments, joint ventures, proprietorships, syndicates, or other legal, business or government entities, and all subsidiaries, affiliates, divisions, departments, branches, or other units thereof.
5. The term "identify," when used in a question about individuals, means to provide the following information: (a) the individual's complete name and title; and (b) the individual's business address and phone number.
6. The term "referring or relating," with respect to any given subject, means anything that constitutes, contains, embodies, reflects, identifies, states, refers to, deals with or is pertinent to that subject in any manner whatsoever.