

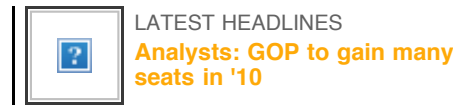
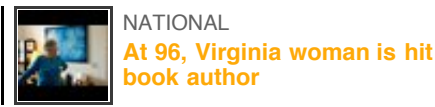
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Tuesday, October 6, 2009

Anti-gunrunning lauded, questioned

IG questions use of funding

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By Jerry Seper

Just days after the Justice Department said its anti-gunrunning project on the U.S.-Mexico border had made "enormous inroads into stemming firearms-related violent crime" and touted a planned expansion of the program, the department's Office of Inspector General on Monday said some funding for the \$22 million project was not being properly used.

In a 39-page report, Inspector General Glenn A. Fine said that while a proposed expansion of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) "Project Gun Runner" should enhance its

ability to combat firearms trafficking along the Southwest border, other planned activities did not appear to represent "the best use of resources to reduce firearms trafficking."

The report also said ATF has an insufficient number of personnel proficient in Spanish to staff the project, "which could pose significant safety and operational challenges," and noted that while ATF had implemented several Spanish-language-training pilot programs and had also made efforts to hire Spanish-proficient staff, better training and hiring were needed to "ensure effective operations and personnel safety on the new Gun Runner teams."

It also said the agency needed to develop "better program measures to assess the impact" that new teams of agents have on firearms trafficking and related violent border crime.

ATF received \$10 million in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 to support and expand Project Gun Runner, in addition to \$11.9 million for the project in fiscal 2009 appropriations and supplemental funding.

The agency is hiring 25 new agents, six industry operations investigators, three intelligence research specialists and three investigative analysts. The agency also planned to open permanent field offices in McAllen, Texas; El Centro, Calif.; and Las Cruces, N.M.; and a satellite office in Roswell, N.M.

But the inspector general's report said that while the project's placement of new agents in McAllen and El Centro appeared soundly based on ATF criteria and additional analysis by the Inspector General's Office, it questioned the decision to place Gun Runner teams in Las Cruces and Roswell. It said ATF gun-crime and workload data showed that the two sites do not have large amounts of firearms trafficking or crime linked to the Mexican cartels.

The inspector general recommended that ATF improve its allocation of resources and implement the planned expansion, but reassess whether other locations along the border represented a better use of resources than Roswell and Las Cruces.

ATF disagreed with the recommendation, saying the establishment of those offices was "justifiable" and that "having field offices placed there was essential to combat firearms

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trafficking."


The agency also has said it will place agents in the Mexican cities of Juarez and Tijuana to work with government officials in that country.

On Thursday, ATF Acting Director Kenneth E. Melson announced the results of the agency's Gun Runner Impact Team (GRIT) Initiative, a 120-day deployment of agents to the Houston field division to disrupt illegal-firearms trafficking. He said the initiative, a component of Project Gun Runner, was developed to aggressively target and disrupt the organizations responsible for trafficking firearms to Mexico.

Mr. Melson said the concentration of additional personnel accomplished more in four months than the agency was able to achieve in almost three years in some areas along the border.

"The temporary deployment of veteran ATF special agents and industry operations investigators to the Houston field division has made enormous inroads into stemming the firearms-related violent crime in the United States and along the Mexican border," Mr. Melson said. "We have begun to flush out firearms-trafficking schemes and routes, producing tangible results in the form of open investigations, arrests, seizures and criminal case referrals."

The GRIT initiative brought 100 experienced ATF agents from across the country to southern Texas, where they investigated more than 1,000 criminal leads and seized more than 440 illegal firearms, 141,440 rounds of ammunition, \$165,000 in U.S. currency, 1,500 pounds of marijuana and additional drugs and explosive devices. The agents opened 276 federal firearms-trafficking-related criminal cases in four months.

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