

**Director Kenneth Melson's Remarks at the South West Border Violent Crime and Arms  
Trafficking Summit  
June 30, 2009  
Albuquerque, NM**

Good morning and welcome.

I've said this before, but I think it bears repeating: The violent crime we are witnessing on the U.S.-Mexico border is a microcosm of the gun violence plaguing much of America—from urban neighborhoods to communities in our nation's heartland.

Narcotics trafficking fuels firearms-related violent crime across our country, not just along the Southwest border.

In June, ICE and ATF agents teamed up with police in Omaha, Nebraska, to arrest 36 members of the Surenos gang in the biggest gun seizure in Nebraska's history.

Sixty-nine weapons were seized in that take-down, including 14 assault rifles, 16 shotguns, and 17 rifles—including a Barrett .50-caliber sniper rifle.

In April, a joint investigation by local law enforcement agencies, DEA and ATF resulted in charges against 26 people for their involvement with a Mexican-based drug cartel (the Gulf Cartel) that was distributing cocaine and methamphetamine throughout the state of Minnesota.

Now, the last time I checked a map, Nebraska and Minnesota were no where near the Southwest Border. But this little fact doesn't seem to bother the cartels too much, these days.

Drawn by America's insatiable appetite for drugs, the cartels have stretched their tentacles into just about every state in this country.

And where there is drug trafficking, there is gun violence.

But make no mistake, our Southwest Border is indisputably the front line of this battle we find ourselves in.

And I believe that law enforcement in both the United States and Mexico have come to realize that we're all in this fight together, and that the only way we're going to win this war is by fighting it together.

I am profoundly encouraged by the fact that genuine inter-agency cooperation is on the rise, and appears to be occurring routinely here on the Southwest Border—and across the United States, for that matter.

Earlier this month, for example, an eight-month investigation in Detroit led to the arrest of 36 gang members by agents from ICE, ATF, DEA, the U.S. Marshals Service, the Michigan State Police and Detroit police officers. That's called Teamwork.

One month earlier, in May, 14 alleged associates of Barrio Azteca, an El Paso-based gang known for money laundering, drug trafficking and violence, were arrested following a joint investigation by ATF, the FBI, DEA, and U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

May of 2009 also saw the nation's largest-ever gang sweep when approximately 1,400 law enforcement officers—including agents with the DEA, ATF and ICE, as well as officers with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, arrested 88 members of a notorious Southern California Street gang operating in Hawaiian Gardens, a small working class city near Los Angeles.

We witnessed another encouraging success story in May of this year when 10 members of a firearms trafficking ring in Houston were arrested on charges related to gun trafficking. The investigation leading to these 10 arrests was initiated by ATF after a routine regulatory inspection of a local firearms dealer.

That dealer's records showed cash purchases of a large number of military-style firearms in 2006 and 2007.

These weapons included numerous assault rifles and weapons known in Mexico as "mata policias," or "police killers," because the ammunition they fire can pierce body armor.

Law enforcement officers on both sides of the border are risking their lives, each day, in the on-going effort to reduce the escalating violence that is shattering the lives of so many innocent people—not just in Mexico, but here in this country as well, in places as far away as Nebraska and Minnesota.

That is the common mission we share, all of us here today: to serve, to protect, to defend the people of both the United States and Mexico; to restore calm to their streets and peace to their lives.

For nearly 40 years, ATF has been deeply involved in the business of fighting violent crime, violent gangs, and gun trafficking. This work is not new to us; it is what we do every day.

## **FIREARMS TRAFFICKING INITIATIVE**

ATF is the federal agency with exclusive jurisdiction in firearms and weapons trafficking investigations. We partner with local law enforcement agencies to concentrate on firearms traffickers who are diverting firearms from lawful commerce into the hands of criminals.

In concert with our many law enforcement partners, we have developed focused enforcement strategies to investigate, arrest, and submit for prosecution repeat violent offenders, prohibited persons, domestic and international firearms traffickers, and others who illegally attempt to acquire firearms.

We are the Violent Crime Component of the Justice Department, and our history and experience make us uniquely qualified to take on the most violent criminals that either Mexico or the United States has to offer.

But this is not a job for just one agency. It is not a job for just one country. This is our fight, and it is Mexico's fight, and I'm happy to say that the cooperation between law enforcement on both sides of the border has been steadily increasing.

## **PROJECT GUNRUNNER**

The United States is intensifying its work with the Government of Mexico to stem the flow of firearms from North to South.

In partnership with other U.S. agencies and the Government of Mexico, ATF developed Project Gunrunner as a pilot initiative around 2005. Using intelligence gleaned from firearms trace data and other sources, Project Gunrunner identifies gun traffickers on *both sides* of the border.

Realizing its success, ATF expanded Gunrunner nationally a little more than a year ago, in January 2008.

We have experienced real results through Project Gunrunner, with more cases being developed annually and an increasing number of defendants being referred for prosecution.

Project Gunrunner has referred for prosecution close to 800 cases involving more than 12,000 firearms and over 15,000 defendants.

And, in 2008 alone, ATF trained more than 750 law enforcement officers in Mexico on firearms identification, firearms trafficking, firearms tracing, explosives identification and bomb blast investigation.

ATF is using intelligence gleaned from its firearms trace data and other sources to place special agents strategically in geographic areas along the entire border – to deny firearms, the “tools of the trade,” to criminal organizations in both Mexico and the United States.

Ever turning up the heat on cartels, our law enforcement and military partners in the government of Mexico have been working more closely with ATF by sharing information and intelligence. Most dramatically has been the increase in firearms trace submissions to ATF.

That information is allowing us to identify trafficking patterns, trends and organizations on both sides of our shared border.

## **GUNRUNNER IMPACT TEAMS**

In fact, ATF has been so successful at developing leads that just a few months ago, we saw the need to relocate experienced agents from other parts of the country to the Southwest border to follow up on those leads.

To that end, we've deployed 100 additional ATF special agents, industry operations investigators, analysts and intelligence personnel to our Houston Field Division for a 120-day detail.

These personnel have been formed into Gun Runner Impact Teams (GRITs) and will be following up on the massive number of investigative leads stemming from our gun tracing efforts.

These teams will also allow us to inspect an additional 700 federal firearms licensees in the region this year.

## **COMPLIANCE INSPECTIONS**

It is important for federal firearms licensees to realize they are at the frontline with ATF to keep legal commodities in America – firearms – out of the hands of criminals.

ATF is the federal agency with sole responsibility for licensing and regulating the firearms industry. ATF inspects all new retail license dealer applications and has conducted approximately 6,500 compliance inspections along the border since Fiscal Year 2007.

Using focused limited resources, we are educating licensed gun dealers through seminars and compliance inspections.

That's important, because we want to keep the pressure on drug cartels by denying them the tools of their trade.

## **TRACING**

An important key to combating firearms trafficking continues to be tracing firearms recovered in crimes.

Consequently, ATF has expanded its efforts to encourage Mexico to trace more guns through eTrace, ATF's Web-based tracing system.

eTrace provides access to ATF's Firearms Tracing System, giving law enforcement, both domestically and internationally, the ability to trace U.S.-sourced firearms seized in connection with criminal activity.

When it comes to crime gun tracing, ATF's goal for Mexico is the same as our goal for the entire United States: to make sure that every single gun used in a crime is traced.

Comprehensive tracing, or 100 percent tracing of crime guns, would give law enforcement a clearer picture of who the traffickers are, where they acquire their weapons, what routes they use and how they develop their schemes for trafficking firearms.

Within the last several years, ATF has experienced a significant increase in the number of trace requests from Mexico.

In fiscal year 2008, Mexico submitted more than 7,500 trace requests for firearms recovered in crimes in Mexico, most of which were traced to sources in Texas, California and Arizona.

We applaud our partners in Mexico for stepping up their efforts to trace more firearms.

This is a good sign, and a sign of good things to come.

With the deployment of eTrace to the nine U.S. consulates in Mexico and the planned implementation of Spanish eTrace later this year, these numbers should continue to increase.

ATF's goal is to deploy eTrace software to all 32 states within the Republic of Mexico.

ATF is partnering with Mexico to continually enhance and improve this important tracing program. Both Mexico and the United States possess the ballistics imaging technology that is so vital to weapons tracing, but the problem has been trying to connect these two systems so they can work together.

President Obama talked about this situation when he visited Mexico recently, and he assured Mexico's law enforcement authorities that the United States is continuing to work hard at merging these two systems.

We are also providing training classes to officers and prosecutors in Mexico, including instruction in eTrace, firearms identification, and firearms trafficking.

## **DON'T LIE FOR THE OTHER GUY**

ATF continues to focus heavily on improving our lines of communication with the firearms industry, as well as the general public. There are approximately 7,300 licensed retail gun dealers and pawn brokers operating in the Southwest border region.

ATF's "Don't Lie for the Other Guy" campaign educates these firearms dealers about straw purchases –gun purchases made by authorized buyers for the benefit of unauthorized buyers.

Our "Don't Lie" campaign helps gun dealers to recognize and deny such sales, thereby cutting off yet another source of weapons for the cartels.....or anyone else seeking to use firearms for criminal purposes.

"Don't Lie" is an educational program we developed in cooperation with the National Shooting Sports Foundation and the firearms industry. Its just one more way ATF is attempting to make a difference here, on the front lines.

ATF prides itself on the strength of our relationships with ALL our law enforcement partners here on the front lines, on both sides of the border, for without these strong relationships we cannot hope to win this fight we are in.

In fact, the success of Project Gunrunner and our Gun Runner Impact Teams depends entirely on cooperation and information sharing among ATF, DEA, the FBI, the U.S. Marshals Service, as well as ICE, CBP and state and local law enforcement agencies.

Looking out upon this audience, I can see that all of you have the courage, patience, and commitment that will be needed for the fight that lies ahead of us.

But success will take more than courage, patience, and commitment. It will take cooperation and communication between our agencies.

It will take partnership.

I want you to know that my agency, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, intends to be the best partner, to all of you, that we can possibly be.

Thank you.