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Gun-store business booming

Shop owner calls Obama 'salesman of the month'

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The economy may be in the tank, but business has never been better at the El Cajon Gun Exchange.

Semiautomatic rifles, handguns and short-barreled shotguns are moving off the shelves and into the hands of customers who share widespread fears that President-elect Barack Obama will restrict their right to own a gun.

"Obama is the salesman of the month," said store owner Louis Baldrige.

Bryan Watters, a Lakeside customer who followed the election rhetoric closely, figured it was a no-brainer to make his first gun purchase sooner rather than later.

"I'm afraid of the revocation of my Second Amendment rights," Watters said Friday after buying a pistol for home protection.

Obama has regularly supported gun-control initiatives, including reinstating the ban on some types of semiautomatic weapons. California already has such a ban in place.

On the campaign trail, he assured voters that he would protect the rights of hunters and other law-abiding Americans to purchase, own, transport and use guns.

Aleida Lafler, owner of the Iron Sights shooting range and gun store in Oceanside, said much of the fear can be traced to the firearms industry, which portrayed Obama as very anti-gun during the campaign.

"I think people are concerned," she said.

In California, pre-purchase background checks – a major indicator of gun sales – spiked by 58 percent the week Obama was elected compared with the same period last year, according to the state Department of Justice.

"We are working a lot of overtime to keep up," said Steve Buford with the department's Bureau of Firearms. Under federal law, the agency has 10 days to check the criminal background of potential gun owners before



PEGGY PEATTIE / Union-Tribune
 American Shooting Center employee Andrew Romero (right) discussed the merits of a handgun with Miguel Ramos at the store in Kearny Mesa. Anecdotal reports from gun stores around the region suggest the postelection buying spree has far surpassed normal holiday sales.

they can bring home their purchases.

Similar buying frenzies have been reported in Colorado, Texas and Obama's home state of Illinois. A distributor in Arizona told one local gun store owner that he sold \$1 million worth of assault weapons in one week.

Data for San Diego County were not available, but anecdotal reports from gun stores around the region suggest the postelection buying spree has far surpassed normal holiday sales.

"We saw this before Y2K (2000) and before Clinton. This has been tremendously larger than that," said Marc Halcon, owner of the American Shooting Center in Kearny Mesa.

He estimates that sales have jumped 60 percent in the past three months.

Jean Goodrich, a gun owner, stopped by the store Thursday to look at a pistol.

"It's not that we won't be able to buy guns after (Obama takes office), but I think it's definitely going to be more difficult," said Goodrich, of Scripps Ranch. "We figured we might as well do it now."

Gun owners point to Obama's record of voting for gun control during his time as an Illinois state senator, as well as a controversial comment he made while on the campaign trail. He said some rural Americans "cling to guns or religion" during difficult times.

Peter Hamm, a spokesman for the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, the nation's largest gun-control lobbying group, called the surge in gun sales "a little bit silly."

"Nobody out there, no law-abiding citizen who has guns, is going to be in danger of losing those guns in your lifetime or mine," Hamm said.

But he said the surge isn't surprising, given the National Rifle Association's multimillion-dollar campaign against Obama.

"I know it's making a lot of gun sellers very, very happy that Barack Obama and Joe Biden are elected. They're having themselves a merry little Christmas because of it," Hamm said.

Some research shows that gun ownership in the country has been falling since 1977. According to the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, 35 percent of households reported owning a gun in 2006, compared with 54 percent in 1977.

At Ranger Doug's Shootists' Emporium in Ramona, the conversation among customers frequently turns to the future of their right to bear arms, said owner Doug Oliver.

He said gun owners were relieved when the U.S. Supreme Court issued a landmark ruling in June upholding an individual's constitutional right to own a gun for personal use. However, with that ruling in mind, Oliver said rumors have been swirling that Democrats may exert their control over firearms by imposing taxes on them.

"Since the elections and before the election, people were coming in and talking about this issue. It concerns a lot of people," said Oliver, a retired La Mesa police officer who opened his shop last year.

Lafler, at the Oceanside range, said she believes the poor economy and an apparent increase in crime has also contributed to the spike in sales.

"We've had customers come in who've had robberies. One lady had a home-invasion incident. Stuff like that

is going on and it's scaring a lot of people," Lafler said.

"The whole combo has just scared people. I think that's what's putting everybody on edge."

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