

N. Van's top Mountie supports gun registry Supt. Enger: 'If you take it away, we lose something'

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The officer in charge of North Vancouver's RCMP detachment is defending the usefulness of Canada's Firearms Registry in response to efforts from a Conservative MP to abolish it.

In her capacity as vice-president of the B.C. Association of Chiefs of Police, Supt. Tonia Enger said the registry is used by the province's police officers thousands of times each day.

"It's used in criminal investigations to determine the origin of firearms," she said. "It gives us a heads-up; we can determine if a residence that we might be going into may or may not have a licensed firearm and also the number and type of firearms. We have a lot of domestic violence situations and a lot of disturbance calls when we don't know why we're getting called. If we have the names and addresses we can see if there's any firearms."

Enger said the registry is also used to help return stolen firearms to their lawful owners.

Candice Hoepfner, who represents the southern Manitoba riding of Portage-Lisgar, filed a private member's bill that, if passed into law, would remove the requirement for gun owners to register their weapons, effectively abolishing the registry. The bill has enjoyed the support of rural MPs from several different parties.

"For me, when I'm driving around listening to the radio," Enger said, "I'm very alerted when dispatch tells a member 'Just so you know, so-and-so is residing there and is believed to be in possession of four handguns and three rifles.' I know on the North Shore it's active all the time."

The Firearms Registry was first set up in 1995, and the Liberal government of the day believed the program would cost taxpayers about \$2 million. But in a scathing 2002 report, Auditor General Sheila Fraser said the registry's bill would be closer to \$1 billion. Abolishing the registry has been a popular topic for Canada's centre-right parties ever since.

"The estimated cost to operate the program currently is between \$3.5 million and \$4 million per year," Enger said. "You may be able to say there were substantial costs to start it up, but we are now in a maintenance mode and it costs substantially less than it did initially."

Enger also turned aside criticism that the registry is an expensive hassle for law-abiding gun owners without helping to catch armed criminals.

"It helps," she said. "It's one component and if you take it away, we lose something. B.C. chiefs of police are coming out to say they support the registry and there's no question that it's strongly supported by the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police as well."

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