

Useless or vital? Cops wade into emotional gun registry debate

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By Andy Blatchford, The Canadian Press

MONTREAL - One cop says it's been useful in countless cases, including one where it helped uncover six firearms and 40,000 bullets from the home of a suspect in a violent crime.

Another police officer calls it a big waste of money that has turned law-abiding gun owners into criminals. The federal long-gun registry, which is now on the verge of extinction, has generally received the support of police associations.

While it has its critics within law-enforcement, it has received strong support from the police chiefs of Canada's biggest cities and the country's biggest police association.

The head of Montreal's police brotherhood eagerly waded into the debate as politicians voted in favour of killing the registry Wednesday. He said the registry has become an essential part of policing.

Yves Francoeur cited how officers seized two registered firearms from the home of a man as he was arrested earlier this year for allegedly assaulting his wife.

After investigators searched the federal gun registry, Francoeur said they discovered the suspect owned another six registered long guns. They confiscated the weapons.

He's incredulous that people would complain about registering a rifle.

"We have to register our vehicles, we have to register our properties, we have to register our trailers and we shouldn't have to register our guns?" asked Francoeur, whose union represents 4,700 officers.

"It doesn't make any sense."

Francoeur said the country's police departments use the registry more than 10,000 times a day. Some critics argue that figure is inflated, saying the long-gun database is accessed each time an officer conducts any type of search in the system.

But Francoeur said removing long guns from the registry would erase 95 per cent of Quebec's registered firearms.

Saskatchewan's police federation vehemently disagreed.

It said the registry had spawned an expensive process that turned some previously lawful firearm owners into criminals.

"All of a sudden there's this law that if they don't follow it they become criminals - we felt that was a bit harsh," said Bernie Eiswirth, a retired cop and director of the Saskatchewan Federation of Police Officers. He said the province's front-line officers have been against the registry since it was first introduced to Parliament in 1993.

"I can tell you that most police officers that I talk to say they haven't changed the way they approach calls or anything - it's still the same as before the registry was in place," said Eiswirth, who heads the only provincial police association in Canada that opposes the registry.

He said that prospective gun owners should have to go through background checks and take safety courses, but the registry system for rifles and shotguns is a waste of money.

Gun regulations should be left up to the provinces, he added.

The president of the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police warned Wednesday that destroying the records of 8 million shotguns and rifles would "make Canada less safe."

"We believe it will compromise the ability of law enforcement to deal effectively with gun violence," William Blair, who also serves as Toronto's police chief, said in a statement.

"The registry has saved lives. We lose it at our peril."