

Firearms database popular with police

Tories release report on registry use two days after key Commons vote

Tonda MacCharles Ottawa Bureau

Published On Sat Nov 7 2009

OTTAWA—New quarterly figures posted on the RCMP's website reveal not just increased police use of the controversial firearms registry, but increased civilian use as well, meaning more guns in the hands of Canadians are being legally registered.

At the end of September, 7.46 million firearms were registered, up from 7.36 million at the end of last year. Of that total, 6.7 million are non-restricted long guns, such as rifles and shotguns, up from 6.6 million at the end of last year.

On Friday, the Conservative government belatedly released the tally for last year in the Commissioner of Firearms 2008 report.

The annual report is required by law, and is already outdated, as a battle erupts between the RCMP and government critics – and in the wider public – over the usefulness of the registry.

MP Dave MacKenzie, parliamentary secretary to Public Safety Minister Peter Van Loan, quietly tabled the 2008 report in the Commons, and left without taking questions from reporters. A largely positive review of the gun-control program, the 2008 report was not released prior to a Commons vote Wednesday that now puts the long-gun registry's future in doubt.

The 2008 report confirmed a strong trend toward increased police use of the gun registry database. But the 2009 numbers are even more pronounced and, the RCMP suggests, indicate a growing confidence in the database.

In 2003, police officers accessed the online firearms registry an average of 1,811 times a day. By the end of September 2009, it was accessed by police an average of 10,818 times a day.

Van Loan justified withholding the 2008 report until now, saying it contained "no new information," and accused staff of the national database of failing to provide relevant statistics in an attempt "to justify the existence" of the registry.

The minister, who was unavailable after the report's release, claimed that although police use of the registry has increased, "only 2.4 per cent" of police queries to the database were related to long-gun registration or serial numbers.

However, the RCMP's quarterly numbers indicate police check the database for a full range of information about gun owners.

Of the more than 10,000 daily queries, the average number directly related to the guns registered – the serial number or registration certificate – was 296 or 2.7 per cent. But that number is not broken down to long guns versus other firearms.

Responding by email to questions from the *Star*, RCMP Sgt. Greg Cox said late Friday the force submitted its 2008 firearms report on Oct. 9, four weeks ago.