


Gun Owners of America Battles ATF 'Gag Order' Over Secret Surveillance of Legal Gun Buyers

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November 14, 2025

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WASHINGTON, DC — Gun Owners of America (GOA) and its legal affiliate, Gun Owners Foundation (GOF), have taken their battle over a controversial gag order to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit. The organizations are challenging a district court's ruling that prohibits them from publicly discussing information they lawfully obtained from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request. The dispute centers on revelations about a secretive program that monitors lawful gun buyers.

The case stems from a FOIA lawsuit filed in 2021 in which GOA and GOF sought details about a previously undisclosed surveillance initiative known as the **NICS Monitoring Program**. According to court filings, this program—administered by the FBI and utilized by the ATF—tracks and flags legal firearm purchases approved through the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS), often without a warrant or suspicion of criminal activity.

In the course of the lawsuit, ATF released multiple sets of documents. In September 2023, the agency made a thirteenth production that mistakenly included unredacted information it claimed should have been withheld under FOIA exemptions. GOA notified the ATF of the error and refrained from publishing the material while the matter was litigated. Nonetheless, the government sought a court order prohibiting GOA from disclosing or using the information. The court granted the request, issuing a "temporary" gag order that was made permanent in July 2025.

GOA argues that the district court had no legal or constitutional authority to issue such an order. In its appeal, GOA contends that the FOIA statute allows courts to order the release of improperly withheld documents but does not authorize agencies to retroactively censor requesters who lawfully received information. They maintain that once records are released—even in error—they are in the public domain and protected under the First Amendment.

"The court's gag order is a classic prior restraint on speech and press rights," GOA's legal team wrote in its opening brief. "There is no national security justification, no risk of irreparable harm, and no statutory basis for the court's action."

The organizations also argue that the district court failed to apply the standard legal test required before issuing a permanent injunction and did not articulate any imminent or serious threat that would result from public disclosure of the records.

While the ATF claims the redacted portions contain private information exempt from disclosure, GOA says it has no interest in publishing sensitive identifiers like Social Security numbers or undercover informant details. Rather, the group seeks to expose what it describes as **unlawful and unconstitutional surveillance of lawful gun purchasers**.

At the heart of the case is a broader concern about government accountability and press freedom. GOA asserts that the gag order is not only unprecedented in FOIA litigation but also undermines the very purpose of the statute—ensuring public access to information about government operations.

From a Pro-2A Perspective

This case raises serious alarms for gun owners and civil libertarians alike. The idea that the government can monitor lawful gun transactions without cause—and then use the courts to silence those who uncover it—should concern anyone who values the Second Amendment and transparency in government. FOIA is designed to empower citizens, not muzzle them. Allowing federal agencies to retroactively censor information just because it's politically or bureaucratically inconvenient sets a dangerous precedent.

If GOA prevails, it could reinforce the rights of citizens and organizations to report on government misconduct without fear of legal retaliation. If the court upholds the gag order, it could chill future efforts to expose unlawful surveillance and deny the public critical insight into how background check systems like NICS are being used beyond their statutory limits.

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