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U.S.

# Gun Silencers Sell Briskly Before New Regulation

Retailers report a surge of sales since a Jan. 4 announcement by the attorney general expected to limit purchases

By ASHBY JONES

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Retailers report a surge in sales of gun silencers since the start of the year, a trend attributed to a forthcoming Obama administration regulation expected to create roadblocks for the most popular way of buying the devices.

Luis Rose, owner of Sterling Arsenal, a gun shop and manufacturer in Sterling, Va., said that by the end of January, he has sold half the year's inventory of one of the most popular silencer brands. Mr. Rose said he typically sells about \$100,000 of those silencers a month, but so far has sold about six times that.

Mr. Rose predicts sales of silencers, which generally run between \$800 and \$1,200, will be "gangbusters" until at least the early summer, when the new rule takes effect.

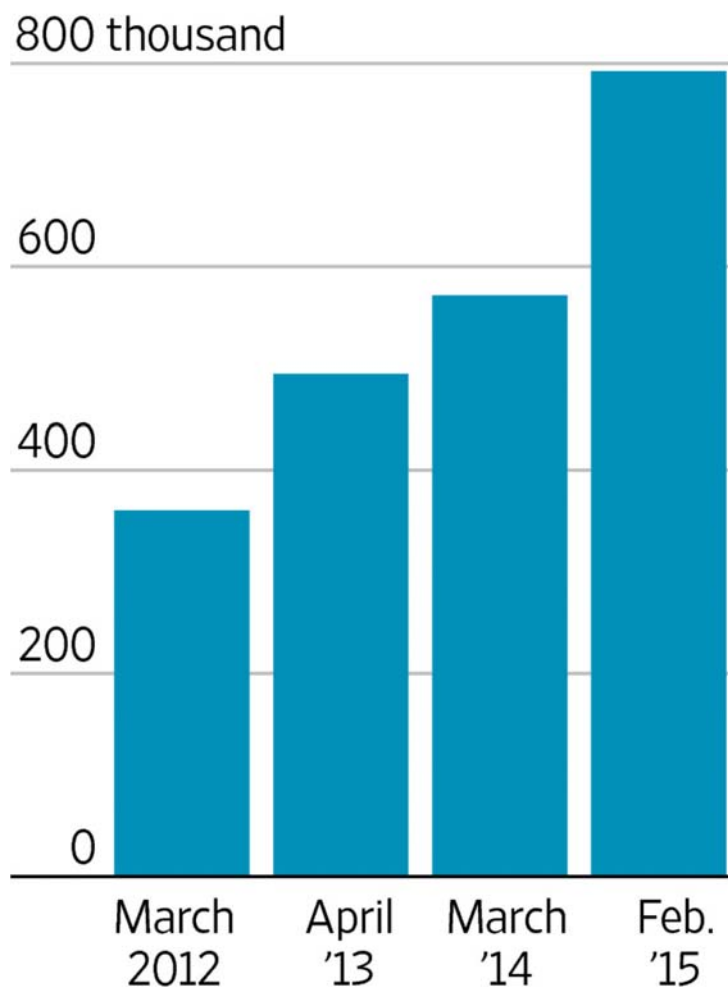
The National Firearms Act of 1934, the Depression-era law governing silencers and a small group of other federally regulated firearms, requires that people who want to buy a silencer first get approval from a local law-enforcement agent.

To sidestep such approval, many buyers have used a loophole for the past decade, according to gun experts, by setting up legal entities called trusts, which don't require law-enforcement signoff.

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## Surge in Demand

Number of registered gun silencers in the U.S.



Source: U.S. Department of Justice  
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Trusts offer other advantages over silencer registrations by individuals. A silencer registered to an individual may be used only by that person. Letting someone else borrow or store the silencer isn't allowed. Trusts allow a group of people to share access to guns and accessories, and freely exchange them among themselves.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms & Explosives said 111,599 trusts for silencers and other firearms covered under the 1934 law were set up in 2014, the latest data available. The figure was up sharply from the 13,710 trusts approved in 2009. As of February 2015, there were 792,282 registered silencers in the U.S., up 277% since late 2010, the ATF says. Gun experts say that is in line with the rise in overall firearm sales during the Obama years.

The new regulation signed by Attorney General Loretta Lynch on Jan. 4, part of the administration's overhaul of firearm background checks, adds hurdles to setting up a legal trust. Starting in July, the members in a new trust must submit fingerprints and photos to federal authorities, and undergo a full federal background check.

Gun owners object to the rule, saying that because silencers help reduce the damage to shooters' ears they shouldn't be made harder to get. Gun-control advocates say loud shots can warn those near a mass shooting or crime scene and silencer purchases should require a background check.

The new regulation does make it easier for individuals to get silencers, by removing the approval requirement from local law enforcement, though they still need to pass a federal background check. However, the vast majority of silencer purchases in recent years have been made by trusts. For instance, Mr. Rose of Sterling Arsenal said that all but three of the roughly 2,000 of his customers in 2015 used trusts to buy silencers.



Silencers are on display at the Sig Sauer booth at the Shooting, Hunting and Outdoor Trade Show on Jan. 19 in Las Vegas. PHOTO: JOHN LOCHER/ASSOCIATED PRESS

“People are staring down significantly more hurdles on setting up a trust, so they’re racing to beat the deadline,” said Dave Matheny, owner of the Silencer Shop in Austin, Texas, based on dozens of conversations with customers. He said silencer sales are “two or three times” what they normally would be at this point in January, to “well over 6,000.” In a normal month, said Mr. Matheny, he might sell 3,000 silencers.

Owen Miller, director of sales at Gemtech, a large silencer maker based in Boise, Idaho, said that while he wouldn't know hard sales numbers for January until next month, demand so far this year has been exceptionally high. “Frankly, it's been hard to keep up. We're running at absolute capacity,” he said.

Gun-rights advocates say misconceptions have developed around gun silencers. They aren't wielded solely by cold-blooded assassins, the way Hollywood often portrays them in movies and television, and they don't magically turn an otherwise ear-splitting gunshot into a sleek whisper, the people say.

"They reduce the noise by 20 to 35 decibels," said Knox Williams, the president of the American Suppressor Association. "With a silencer, a shotgun blast emits the noise level of a jet engine."

Gun-control advocates say that people looking to muffle those sounds should have to pass a simple background check.

"To state the obvious, [a background check provides nothing] to worry about for guys who have no history of violence to hide," said Ladd Everitt, a spokesman for the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, a Washington, D.C., gun-control group.

— *Joe Palazzolo contributed to this article.*

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