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The State of the Gun Industry

The 24th annual SHOT (Shooting, Hunting, and Outdoor Trade) Show will be held February 2 to 5, 2002, in Las Vegas, Nevada. Sponsored by the gun industry trade group the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF), the SHOT Show is the largest annual gun trade show in America and the major showcase for handguns, rifles, shotguns, and ammunition for the civilian market.

On the evening of February 2, NSSF President and Chief Executive Officer Bob Delfay will host the annual state of the gun industry meeting, where top industry and trade group representatives will describe the health of the firearms industry and the outlook for the future. This report details five of the most dangerous trends in how the gun industry markets its products and targets new groups of consumers.

50 Caliber Sniper Rifles. 50 caliber sniper rifles are capable of accurately hitting a long-range target at 1,800 meters (1,969 yards), blasting through two inches of solid concrete at 200 meters (219 yards), or destroying a spectrum of personnel and material targets at other ranges. The market for 50 caliber sniper rifles has exploded. There is an array of new manufacturers, a proliferation of models, and a dramatic reduction in price. Today, 50 caliber rifles are still easier to buy than handguns: a youth of 18 years can legally buy a 50 caliber sniper rifle, but cannot purchase a handgun until age 21. In the past two years, the gun industry has offered a much broader choice of 50 caliber sniper rifles and the price has plummeted.

Most alarming in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon is the 50 caliber's threat as an ideal tool for assassination and terrorism, including its ability to attack and cripple key elements of the nation's critical infrastructure—including aircraft and other transportation, electrical power grids, pipeline networks, chemical plants, and other hazardous industrial facilities. *Voting From the Rooftops*, a report by the Violence Policy Center, documents in detail the clear and present danger 50 caliber sniper rifles present to all Americans. It proves beyond doubt that terrorists and other ruthless criminals now have the means, the training, and the motivation to inflict extraordinary harm on America with 50 caliber sniper rifles.

Unintended Consequences. While gun manufacturers work to exploit Americans' fears in the aftermath of the September 11 tragedy, they have been working even harder to keep hidden from the American public a secret they readily share amongst themselves—handguns are a poor choice as a tool for self-defense. The Violence Policy Center study, *Unintended Consequences*, is comprised substantially of writings from *pro-gun experts* who readily admit handguns are extremely difficult, if not virtually impossible, to use effectively in self-defense. Handguns in the real world—as opposed to the industry's fantasy world of virtuous defensive

gun use—make people who own them much less safe. The study reveals that according to leading *pro-gun experts* the overwhelming majority of people who own handguns:

- ! are ignorant of—or ignore—basic handgun safety rules;
- ! do not have the necessary handgun combat marksmanship skills to effectively defend themselves *without harming innocent others*; and,
- ! are not prepared for the extreme physiological and psychological effects that the experts, many of whom have on-the-street law enforcement experience with firearms, agree inevitably occur in an armed life-or-death confrontation (the only situation in which lethal force is justified in self-defense).

Pocket Rockets. In an effort to boost declining gun sales, the gun industry has increased the lethality of its products by producing larger caliber, higher capacity, and more readily concealable guns known as “pocket rockets.” The industry has heavily promoted “pocket rockets” in connection with a wave of new or revised state laws that permit licensed persons to carry concealed firearms. “Pocket rockets” are an example of how the firearms industry has exploited greater killing power in their weapons over the last several decades to attract new customers. The Violence Policy Center report, *Pocket Rockets: The Gun Industry’s Sale of Increased Killing Power*, addresses the guns’ increased lethality and offers several policy recommendations. Virtually all handgun manufacturers now sell “pocket rockets,” including: Smith & Wesson; Colt’s Manufacturing Company; Glock; Sturm, Ruger & Company, Inc.; and Hi-Point Firearms.

Marketing to Kids. The gun industry has struggled with stagnant or declining sales for several years because of the saturation of its primary market of white males. An advertisement for New England Firearms summed up the challenge facing the industry, “In effect, [the] greatest threat we face is the lack of a future customer base for the products which we all sell.” In response, the gun industry is aggressively targeting children as the new market that will ensure its fiscal and political future. The NSSF, the National Rifle Association (NRA), and gun manufacturers openly acknowledge their desire to cultivate an expanded youth market.

The Violence Policy Center report, *A .22 for Christmas*, details how the gun industry has developed smaller, lighter versions of adult firearms and marketed them as “youth models” for children as young as four years old. The gun lobby attempts to entice children through the promotion of such activities as “practical” or “combat” shooting, where participants navigate a run-and-gun, self-defense course using a wide range of weapons, and “Cowboy Action” shooting, where participants dress up and take part in “wild west” scenarios. The gun industry promises that such training virtually guarantees good citizenship, but the only guarantee is one of increased risk of death and injury.

Unregulated Shooting Ranges. Although outdoor firing ranges put more lead into the environment than nearly any other major industrial sector in the United States, they remain almost entirely unregulated. In just two years a typical outdoor firing range can have lead contamination equivalent to a five-acre Superfund site.

Despite President George W. Bush's warning on April 18, 2001, in *The Washington Post* that "lead is a persistent and highly toxic substance that can cause a range of environmental and health problems," and "has an especially harmful impact on the health of children and infants," the owners and operators of these shooting ranges continue contaminating communities because of a near total lack of regulation by the government. The Violence Policy Center report, *Poisonous Pastime: The Health Risks of Shooting Ranges and Lead to Children, Families, and the Environment*, chronicles the dangers to both children and the environment from lead contamination of shooting ranges.

Despite the gun industry's knowledge of extensive lead pollution at shooting ranges, they downplay the seriousness of the contamination and the health risks from lead exposure, hide the information from the public, and fight against further health and safety regulations regarding lead contamination. This is because a keystone to their survival strategy is increasing the number of shooting ranges.

The NRA, NSSF, and the gun industry encourage parents to take their children to shooting ranges to continue the "wholesome tradition" of the shooting sports. Parents who follow gun-industry advice risk severely damaging their children's health and welfare. Children suffer the most from exposure to lead and the health risks of lead poisoning are dramatic—including attacks on many different body organs and systems. The gun industry—through toxic and unregulated ranges—is sacrificing the health of our children for profit.

Conclusion

As the gun industry gathers to celebrate their deadly trade, the SHOT Show offers a unique and disturbing opportunity to see firsthand the marketing strategies and increasingly lethal products of the gun industry. The clear picture that emerges from the SHOT Show is that what is good for the gun industry's bottom line is dangerous for public health and safety.

For additional information on the trends detailed in this report or firearm manufacturers expected to attend this year's SHOT Show, please contact the Violence Policy Center at (202) 822-8200.