

Shooters Committee on Political Education

Position Paper



A 3322 Kavanagh (MS)

Same as S 2028 Squadron

Bans the sale, use, or possession of .50 caliber rifles

PURPOSE

The objective of this proposal is to ban the possession of all .50 caliber rifles. The proposal is based on the premise that rifles in this caliber are intended for military purposes only and have no legitimate civilian or sporting purpose. Moreover, it is contended that these rifles are potential weapons of choice for violent criminals, international and domestic terrorists, militias, and cults.

POSITION

SCOPE opposes this legislation. It is a mischaracterization based on false and misleading premises and is an example of creating a problem where none currently exists. Large caliber, long-range rifle shooting is a perfectly legitimate sporting activity and poses no threat to public safety. It must be noted that these rifles are not the “weapon of choice” for criminal groups and that there is, in fact, no documented record of their actual use in a criminal incident in the United States. Exaggerated, misleading, and erroneous claims have been used to demonize a specific firearm and to attempt to paint it as a threat to public safety.

History

A little background is helpful in understanding this issue. Development of the .50 BMG cartridge was begun in 1918 in response to a request from General Pershing for a large caliber machine gun primarily for aircraft use. Military use expanded to include aircraft, antiaircraft, antimaterial, and long-range suppressive fire. The use of this cartridge in long-range rifles grew out of the recognition by some military personnel in the field during the Korean and Vietnam wars of a military need for a long-range precision rifle. When the military hierarchy did not pursue the matter, private research and development undertook the challenge. By 1982, target rifles were on the commercial market. The focus of the civilian shooters was on the technical challenge of accurate long range shooting. Later adoption by the military for combat applications was an ancillary benefit to national security.

Long-range rifle shooting has been a recreational and competitive activity in the United States for over 150 years.

The concept of long-range rifle competition is not a new one. Long-range rifle shooting has been a popular sport throughout the history of our country. Many major national and international competitions were held at the Creedmoor Rifle Range on Long Island, which opened in 1873. The first major international competition on the new range was between the United States and Ireland, representing the United Kingdom, held in 1875. The match, which was shot at 800, 900, and 1000 yards, was won by the United States. Matches at 1000 yards have been a component of the National Matches since their inception. The introduction of rifles chambered for the .50 BMG cartridge has permitted an increase in the distance and presented competitive shooters with new challenges.

The Fifty Caliber Shooters Association (FCSA)¹ is the national governing body for sports shooting with the .50 rifle. The FCSA has over 4,000 members in 22 countries. The stated purpose of the FCSA is to advance the art of extreme long-range accuracy with rifles chambered for the .50 BMG cartridge. It provides the environment for individuals to acquire the technical and scientific knowledge needed to increase their long range shooting skills. It makes available the infrastructure for long-range rifle shooter development and competition, serving as the forum for technical information and assistance through the association's publications and website. "Our hobby is about engineering, mathematics, and physics, not crime and shooting per se."²

The proposed legislation bans all rifles of .50 caliber or larger, regardless of use.

This proposal would ban a large number of big game rifles in calibers ranging from .500 through .700. These rifles, which are designed for hunting dangerous game, are intended for use at ranges of less than 200 yards. Ammunition for these rifles is designed with this use in mind and is not ballistically suitable for long range shooting. The purpose of these rifles is purely sporting; this is recognized in federal law, where they are exempt from the prohibition on rifles with a bore over .5 inch.³

Access to potentially destructive .50 ammunition is limited or prohibited.

The only new .50 BMG ammunition available to the civilian market, produced domestically or imported, is loaded with conventional ball projectiles.

Remanufactured .50 BMG ammunition loaded with armor piercing, tracer, and incendiary projectiles is available to a limited extent on the civilian market. The source of these projectiles was the Department of Defense (DOD). As part of the Conventional Ammunition Demilitarization Program, DOD paid private contractors to take possession of damaged, obsolete, or surplus ammunition without restriction as to disposition. The firms then broke down the ammunition, recycled the components, and remanufactured completed ammunition for sale to foreign military purchasers or in the civilian market. As a prohibition on commercial sale in the United States was imposed on these contracts starting in 2001, this is a diminishing issue.

The ammunition described above represents World War II (or prior) technology. Military ammunition loaded with projectiles utilizing newer technologies, such as the M903 SLAP⁴ or Mk211⁵ projectile, is manufactured exclusively for the military and has never been commercially available on the civilian market.

While the .50 caliber BMG round is powerful, its destructive capabilities are regularly overstated.

The .50 BMG round is indeed a powerful cartridge with excellent long-range performance. It achieves this performance by utilizing a heavy bullet with a high ballistic coefficient at about the same initial velocity as a conventional .30 hunting rifle. It is this capability to perform accurately at long range that attracts .50 caliber rifle shooters.

¹ Fifty Caliber Shooters Association, PO Box 111, Monroe, UT 84754. www.fcsa.org

² Fifty Caliber Shooters Association Fact Sheet (ND)

³ 18 U.S.C. § 921(4)(C)

⁴ Saboted Light Armor Penetrator

⁵ An armor piercing, incendiary and explosive projectile (HEIAP), known as the Raufoss, after its Norwegian manufacturer, NAMMO Raufoss.

Proponents of banning these rifles attribute tremendous destructive power to them. These grossly exaggerated claims are then amplified by the popular press leading to an almost mystical belief in their destructive capability. It has been alleged that .50 BMG projectiles will penetrate everything from 1 inch armor plate to 3½ inch manhole covers.⁶ Gun control advocates have claimed that they are capable of “knocking a locomotive off the tracks”⁷ or shooting down an aircraft.⁸ It is just a big bullet with a lot of energy, nothing more.

With respect to the armor piercing capability of the .50 BMG cartridge, the U.S. military specifications for penetration of homogenous steel plate for .50 BMG ball ammunition is .32 inches at 500 meters. By way of comparison, the Caliber 7.62 NATO M61 Armor Piercing rifle cartridge was designed to penetrate .20 inches of steel plate at 500 meters. There are projectiles with considerably better performance, such as the M903 SLAP and Mk211 noted above, but they have never been commercially available in the United States. It can be clearly seen that, while the .50 BMG cartridge is indeed powerful, it hardly possess the “shock and awe” attributed to it by the sponsors of this legislation.

Bringing down an aircraft, even during landing or take off, would be extremely difficult. The military does not even train troops using .50 BMG rifles in this tactic. The .50 BMG simply does not have the power to do enough damage to put a multi-engine aircraft at risk. A .30 hunting rifle would be equally effective. The US Air Force determined in 1943 that a .50 BMG based weapons system, even one capable of firing 120 rounds per second, was not adequate for engaging aircraft. A considerable amount of taxpayer dollars were expended before the Air Force determined that a 20mm (.80 caliber) projectile was the minimum required to be effective against aircraft.⁹

There is no record of a locomotive being visibly moved by a .50 projectile. Given the relative disparity in their weights, it is highly unlikely. Discounting adhesive traction, the total theoretical movement would be less than 0.03 inches.

The argument put forth by the proponents of legislation to ban these rifles seems to be based on the premise that if they were employed by the military they are too dangerous and should not be available to civilians. They ignore the fact that these rifles were purely a civilian, private sector development that was adopted by the military. This is fear mongering based on highly enhanced scenes from movies and television shows – and certainly not reality TV.

The .50 BMG rifle was developed by private citizens for civilian use, without government funding, prior to its adoption by the military.

The military requirement for an effective long-range rifle began to emerge in the Korean War and became clear during Vietnam. One-off rifles were put together in the field using captured Russian anti-tank rifle actions and .50 BMG machine gun barrels. They proved the concept but lacked the refinement of a formal accuracy development effort and were handicapped by the lack of suitable ammunition. While this was apparent to the troops on the ground, they were not able to convince the military hierarchy of the need for a weapon of this type. Without funding, formal development within the military languished.

⁶ NYS Assembly. Bill A9864 (2010) Sponsor’s Memo

⁷ Congressman Jim Moran (VA)

⁸ Tom Diaz, Interview on CBS News Show *60 Minutes*, Jan. 9, 2005

⁹ F.W. Hackley, W.H. Woodin, E.L. Scranton (1978). *History of Modern U.S. Military Small Arms Ammunition*. Gettysburg PA, Thomas Publications 178-205

In the late 1970's, interest had developed among individuals in the private sector in extreme long range shooting as a technical challenge. They began to advance accurate long range shooting as a sport and competitive activity. The need for a more powerful cartridge to meet the ballistic requirements of shooting at over 1000 yards led to the adoption of the readily available .50 BMG cartridge. After several years of design and engineering work, production .50 BMG rifles went on the market in 1982. Development of more accurate bullets and match-grade ammunition suitable for very long range shooting continued, further enhanced by the formation of the FCSA in 1985.

The result was that when the military recognized the need for the .50 BMG rifle as a weapon just prior to the first Iraq war, there were suitable rifles and precision ammunition available. All developed by target shooters in the private sector with no government funding. To this day, FCSA members share their knowledge and experience with the U.S. military.

These are not the “weapon of choice” for criminals

These rifles are 4 to 5 feet long, weigh between 25 and 40 pounds and cost from \$3,000 to \$9,000. This is not a highly mobile or concealable weapon. To suggest that these rifles should be banned on the premise that they might someday, somewhere be used by somebody in a street crime is pure conjecture.

CONCLUSION

The proposed legislation is a blatant attempt to demonize a particular group of rifles based on their physical characteristics. Using claims that range from exaggeration to being demonstrably false, these rifles are erroneously represented as a threat to public safety, if not national security.

This is a case of attempting to create a problem where none exists. We are convinced that if this legislation is enacted, the sponsors will be back next session using the same arguments against another long-range cartridge. This is a campaign against a skill set as much as against a rifle.

The FCSA and its members have provided the country with a valuable service in the development and refinement of the .50 BMG cartridge for long-range precision shooting. When the military needed it, it was ready, along with the knowledge base to insure effective implementation. They deserve a commendation, not condemnation

This legislation should clearly not be adopted. .