



POSITION STATEMENT

A3211A/S4752 PROHIBIT THE POSSESSION OF .50 CALIBER RIFLES

CONCEPT

The proposal would ban the sale or possession of all rifles of .50 caliber or larger. The particular target of this legislation is the .50 Browning Machine Gun (.50 BMG) cartridge as used in a number of bolt action and semi automatic target rifles. The proposal is based on the premise that rifles of this caliber or larger 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

The proposed legislation should not be enacted. Such mischaracterizations are based on false and misleading premises and would create problems 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

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, anti aircraft, anti material, and long-range suppressive fire. The use 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 this was not addressed by the military hierarchy, private research and development took up the challenge. By 1982, 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 BMG. 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 the .50 BMG rifle. It provides the environment for individuals to increase their shooting skills and develop the necessary technical and scientific knowledge. It makes available the infrastructure for long-range rifle shooter development and competition, serving as the forum for technical information and assistance through their 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 and 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 BMG 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 on the civilian market. The source of these projectiles is the Department of Defense (DOD). As part of the Conventional 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 on the civilian market.

The ammunition described above dates from World War II (or prior) designs. Ammunition loaded with newer technology, such as the M903 SLAP⁴ or Mk 211⁵ projectiles, is manufactured exclusively for the military and has never been available on the civilian market.

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.

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 shoot accurately at long range that attracts .50 caliber BMG rifle shooters.

Proponents of banning the possession of these rifles attribute tremendous destructive power to them. These 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

With respect to the armor piercing capability of the .50 BMG cartridge, the U.S. military specifications for penetration of homogenous steel plate are as follows:

M2 Ball	.32 inches @ 500 meters	.16 inches @ 1200 meters
M2 Armor Piercing	.75 inches @ 500 meters	.40 inches @ 1200 meters

There are projectiles with better performance, such as the M903 SLAP, but they have never been commercially available in the United States. 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.

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 enemy aircraft. A considerable amount of effort was spent developing a .60 cartridge until, in 1953, the Air Force determined that a 20mm (.80 caliber) projectile was the minimum required to meet their requirements.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 about .01 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. This is fear mongering based on scenes from movies and television shows – and not reality TV.

⁶ NYS Assembly. Bill A03211 Summary

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

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.

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.

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 \$8,000. 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 in a street crime is pure conjecture.

RECOMMENDATION

The proposed legislation attempts 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 falsely 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 as well 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 not be enacted.