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Napolitano denies knowledge of Fast and Furious gun-tracking program

By Jordy Yager, correspondent for The Hill

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Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano told senators for the first time Tuesday that she had no knowledge of a botched federal gun-tracking program while it was ongoing.

In testimony before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, Napolitano said she was first made aware of the Fast and Furious operation after U.S. Border Patrol Agent Brian Terry was killed in the line of duty.

"Let me be very clear for the record, you were unfamiliar with Operation Fast and Furious while the operation was under way?" asked Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.).

"That is accurate," Napolitano replied.

The Fast and Furious operation was started by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives in 2009 to try to track weapons from the United States to Mexican drug cartels by authorizing the sale of guns in the Southwest border region to known and suspected straw purchasers for the cartels.

But ATF agents were often told to abandon their surveillance of the weapons, allowing them — and the straw buyers — to disappear, according to House testimony from numerous agents. The only remaining hope for agents to track the guns was if other agencies found them at crime scenes or during drug raids and identified them by their serial numbers.

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Authorities discovered that two such weapons sold under the operation were found at the Arizona murder scene of Terry last December. And according to testimony, agents in the region are terrified that some of the thousands of guns still at large will be used to kill more innocent people.

Napolitano said she first found out about the operation after Terry's killing and that she is declining to comment on it further until the Department of Justice inspector general's office completes its independent review of the operation. Attorney General Eric Holder ordered the IG report earlier this year.

"First of all, we wanted to make sure that the investigation into the cause of the death and prosecution was pursued vigorously," she said.

"And that was being done. I did meet with the FBI agent-in-charge in Arizona at the time. At the time I was told that DOJ was referring the entire matter to the inspector general, so we have reserved judgment until that report has come about."

McCain asked Napolitano to supply the committee with the specific date when she found out that guns sold under the operation were found at the scene of Terry's killing.

McCain has long butted heads with Napolitano, who is the former governor of Arizona, but he is a late-comer to criticism of the administration regarding Fast and Furious. The lead congressional investigators have been Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa), ranking member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, and Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.), chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee.

Two weeks ago, ATF Director Kenneth Melson was transferred for his part in the Fast and Furious operation, and Arizona U.S. Attorney Dennis Burke, who oversaw the legal aspects of the operation, resigned his position.

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