

Up Front/Commentary:

Idaho lawmakers are at home on the gun range

William L. Spence /Lewiston Tribune

BOISE - When Rep. JoAn Wood returned home from her husband's funeral several years ago and discovered that someone had broken in and stolen his gun collection, she just wanted to cry.

The 78-year-old Rigby Republican wasn't shedding any tears Thursday, though. After firing a few bursts from a Thompson submachine gun during gun night at the Idaho Legislature, Wood was all grins - and eager for any low-life burglars to make a return visit.

"I'll be ready for them next time," she said.

Gun control may be all the rage in Washington, D.C., but it doesn't get much play in Idaho, where the Second Amendment enjoys greater support than some of the Ten Commandments.

Guns and lawmakers is an almost iconic combination in the Gem State, as popular as peanut butter and jelly. Almost three dozen senators and representatives attended last week's event. Several brought along spouses or children, as well as their own personal firearms.

"It gets bigger and bigger every year," said Paul Jagosh, a 10-year veteran with the Boise Police Department and lobbyist for the Idaho Fraternal Order of Police.

The FOP has sponsored a night at the shooting range for state lawmakers for the past six years. It gives those on the enforcement side of the law a chance to discuss their legislative priorities, while elected officials get to try out several kinds of rifles and handguns.

This was Wood's first time shooting with the big dogs, but she got the hang of things quickly. Dressed in a stylish blue jacket and red, white and blue scarf, she tried out a .38-caliber pistol, but thought the Thompson's added firepower suited her better.

"It's too bad they're outlawed," she said. "For me, it might almost be safer."

Rep. Brent Crane, R-Nampa, looked quite comfortable with an assault weapon in his arms, firing a full clip from a 9 mm MP5 submachine gun.

"I know what I want for Christmas," he said.

Lewiston Rep. John "Just call me Dillinger" Rusche showed Democrats can shoot, too, holding up a target he'd just shredded with a .45-caliber pistol.

Even with good ear protectors, the indoor facility at Impact Guns reverberated with the loud "Boom, boom, boom," from the .45, the submachine guns and an

AR-15 assault rifle. You could feel the shock waves from several feet away.

Down at the quiet end of the range, Gemtech salesman Joey Harris was loading special "Silencer Subsonic" ammunition into a .22-caliber pistol equipped with a suppressor. The Hollywood-quiet gun emitted a small "phhht, phhht, phhht," as lawmakers squeezed off rounds.

"If it weren't for all the other (firearms), we could use this without ear protectors," Harris said.

Gemtech, with offices in Boise and Michigan, is a leading manufacturer of firearm suppressors. Also called silencers, the devices don't eliminate the noise from shooting, but can bring the sound down to safer levels. They're legal to own in Idaho and most other states, although a federal background check is required and buyers must pay a \$200 tax.

"In Europe, you can buy suppressors over the counter," said Sen. Marv Hagedorn, R-Meridian. "More and more military units and police forces are training with them - not to be stealthy, but so they can hear and talk to each other. It's a health and safety issue."

The FOP provided about 3,500 rounds of ammunition for gun night. Most of it came from ATK in Lewiston. It was delivered by Lewiston police officers Eric Olson and Dock White, representing the Lewiston FOP lodge.

Jagosh and other local officers also donated their time to the event, giving lawmakers pointers on how to use the different firearms.

"That was fun," Wood said, after blasting away with the Thompson. "I've never shot (a submachine gun) before, and I've never shot a pistol. My grandkids go out target shooting at our ranch and tell me all the time, 'Come and shoot, Grandma, come and shoot.' I'm going to march right up there next time."

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