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Gun Makers May Move Because of California Gun Control Bills

By Gray Scott, The Business Press, Ontario, Calif.

Knight-Ridder/Tribune Business News

Jun. 16--Proposed state gun control legislation has put a trio of Inland Empire handgun manufacturers on the firing line.

Winding their way through Sacramento's two houses are virtually identical bills that would force California gun manufacturers to meet the quality standards required for imported guns.

The laws would affect at least three local manufacturers: Mira Loma-based Lorcin Engineering, Chino-based Davis Industries and Ontario-based Phoenix Arms. All three make handguns that sell in the \$100 range, often called "Saturday Night Specials."

Lorcin founder and President Jim Waldorf and Phoenix President Dave Brazeau say the bills, if passed, won't put them out of business. But passage of the bills may make them move out of state.

Phoenix and its local suppliers employ roughly 100 employees; Lorcin employs 30.

Should either bill become law, Waldorf says his Mira Loma facility will start following the new standards -- resulting in a new line of more-expensive guns. Waldorf figures he'd just move Lorcin's cheaper line of guns to Nevada.

Brazeau, on the other hand, vowed to move the entire Phoenix Arms operation out of state if a law against manufacturing inexpensive handguns proves too tough to deal with.

Officials at Davis Industries would not comment.

Specifically, the bills would force domestic handgun manufacturers to meet product requirements of the 1968 U.S. Gun Control Act -- a law that set standards for foreign-made, imported handguns, according to Bill Mabie, chief aide for State Sen. Richard Polanco (D-Los Angeles), author of one of the bills.

Those standards target guns that are easily concealable or made with nonsteel parts, but make allowances for "sporting" guns that come equipped with such details as sports grips and sports targeting sights, officials say.

If the law passes, gun owners also won't be able to sell or transfer ownership of guns that violate the new standards after Jan. 1, 1998. The Polanco bill would make exceptions for guns made before 1998, but the Assembly version of the bill, authored by Assemblyman Louis Caldera (D-Los Angeles), would apply to guns made before that date as well.

Mabie said the bills, which he expects will reach Gov. Wilson's desk

within two months, are not intended to drive manufacturers out of business -just force them to make better guns. He views the 1968 act as a safety law, although opponents of the bills argue that the earlier law was part of a protectionist policy.

"It just seems logical that local manufacturers would be held to these standards," Mabie said. "The issue is that we have a law on the books that's worked for nearly 30 years. If it's good enough for guns imported into the U.S., it's good enough for domestic manufacturers."

Lorcin's Waldorf said that if the bills become law, the cost of the company's handguns would shoot to about \$600.

"I believe it's wrapped in the guise of being a safety issue, but it's a gun control issue based on price," he said. "Basically what it says is, if people can't afford \$600 for a gun, they can't buy a gun."

Mabie argues that the issue is safety. "We don't sell cars without headlights and brakes so they'd be accessible to people of lesser means," he said. Moreover, Mabie argues, Saturday Night Specials are commonly bought and used by criminals.

But Bob Ricker, director of governmental affairs for the American Shooting Sports Council, said Saturday Night Specials are connected often to crime simply because there are so many more of them made, compared with higher-priced guns.

The council, which is fighting the two bills, believes the U.S. Gun Control Act is being misused by the bill's authors. Ricker argues that the original act had more to do with protecting American industry from foreign competition than with safety.

The act favored gun parts made from forged steel in an attempt to drive up the price of foreign guns, which were often made with cheaper materials and less labor intensive processes, he said.

Ricker suspects Saturday Night Special makers will simply strap sporting accessories onto their handguns to get around the proposed laws, raising the average price to about \$175, but not making the guns any safer.

Not that he thinks they're unsafe to begin with. Although some parts of the 1968 act, which the California bills invoke, address ways to prevent unintentional firing, Ricker argues that the cheap handguns made by Lorcin, Davis and Phoenix already possess safety features.

Phoenix, for instance, has a "magazine interlock" feature that makes its guns unusable as long as the magazine is removed. That way, if a round is unintentionally left in the chamber, the gun won't fire, Phoenix president Brazeau said.

"There's no other gun on the market today that has that feature, not even at \$1,500 retail," Brazeau said.

Both Ricker and Carolyn Herberston, a spokeswoman for Gun Owners Incorporated in Sacramento, argued that any American manufacturer who turned out unsafe guns would be chased out of business by lawsuits. "The liability alone would kill them," Herbertson said.

Due to the original act's age, it ignores advances in composite materials that are being increasingly used in handgun manufacturing, Ricker said. That means the California laws would affect every American gun manufacturer and seller doing business in the state, not just makers of \$100 handguns, he said.