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Judge expected to rule by Aug. 27 in 3D-printed gun file case

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A federal judge in Washington state on Tuesday pledged a quick ruling on whether he will continue to block a Texas company from sharing online blueprints for crafting 3D-printed guns, while also saying at a hearing in the case that the hot-button issue ideally would be settled by Congress or the White House.

Until U.S. District Judge Robert S. Lasnik rules on the case, which he said he would do by Monday, a temporary restraining order he granted last month that effectively blocks the company, Defense Distributed, from posting new files will remain in effect until Aug. 28.

Judge Lasnik said that while he would rule on the legal issues involved in the case, “a solution to the greater problem is so much better suited” to the president or Congress.

Cody Wilson, founder of Defense Distributed, started posting the files online several years ago, but President Obama’s State Department said in 2013 that he could be violating export control rules, so he took them down.

Mr. Wilson sued, saying he had a First Amendment right to post the files. After a lengthy legal battle, he reached a settlement with the State Department this year that would allow him to publish the files once again.

A coalition of state attorneys general sued, saying that allowing the files to be posted online would interfere with their rights to set their own gun laws and that the Trump administration cut corners in reversing the State Department’s previous position.

Washington Assistant Attorney General Jeff Rupert also argued Tuesday that the government’s decision to allow the company to post the blueprints is a threat to public safety and should be reversed.

Judge Lasnik stepped in on July 31 and ordered a temporary halt to the deal, saying the states had a “clear and reasonable fear” that the proliferation of undetectable weapons would enable people otherwise barred from possessing guns to get their hands on them.

Mr. Wilson and his lawyers have argued that the files are protected free speech, not actual guns, and that it doesn't make sense to block him from posting more files since so many of them are already online.

"We were grateful the court carefully considered our arguments, and look forward to the ruling on Aug. 27," said Josh Blackman, one of the company's attorneys, on Tuesday.

The Trump administration also said the lawsuit should be tossed and that it doesn't have the authority to regulate file transfers between individuals in the U.S.

A lawyer for the Justice Department argued Tuesday that it is illegal to possess plastic guns and that the government is committed to enforcing that law — a point U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions made clear last week.

But Judge Lasnik repeatedly questioned that logic, asking how the government can be vigorously enforcing a law banning plastic, undetectable guns but not proactively stopping them from being made.

Gun-rights advocates and some analysts have said states can't claim they're suffering "irreparable harm" if so many of the files are already being freely distributed over the internet.

"All of this litigation that we've been hearing about, the state of front-page news a few weeks ago — it's really more of a political stunt than going to have any practical effect," said Ilya Shapiro, a senior fellow in constitutional studies at the libertarian Cato Institute.

But gun-control advocates say the proliferation of the blueprints means that people otherwise barred from getting guns, like those convicted of domestic abuse, can simply print their own, circumventing those restrictions.

"You are best positioned to safeguard America from the risks posed by foreign terrorists and other dangerous people gaining easy access to 3-D printed guns without benefit of a background check, armed with weapons potentially undetectable by metal detectors and untraceable by law enforcement because they lack metal components and serial numbers," a handful of gun control groups wrote recently to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.