



# Utah Rep. Stewart: Defund Burgeoning Armed Federal Employees

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Federal agencies are increasingly granting agents the authority to carry weapons and execute search warrants, a trend that one congressman is hoping to reverse.

Rep. Chris Stewart is preparing legislation to defund the law enforcement units of agencies, such as the Bureau of Land Management and the Environmental Protection Agency, whose primary purpose is regulatory.

"The fundamental challenge is that people like me simply do not trust the federal government any longer. We see examples of non-law enforcement agencies taking a very heavy hand, using armed SWAT teams against citizens, and that leads to an even deeper mistrust," the Utah Republican told Newsmax.

The BLM has 200 uniformed law enforcement rangers and 70 special agents who are authorized to carry weapons, while the EPA has 200 "fully authorized" special agents, according to its website.

Other agencies with law enforcement units include the Department of Education, the Bureau of Engraving, the Federal Reserve Board, and the U.S. Postal Inspection Service.

While the recent standoff between Nevada cattle rancher Cliven Bundy and the BLM highlighted the issue, Stewart said his bill is not a direct response to that controversy.

"We are in a sustained effort to defund these units because not only are they completely unnecessary, they are doing more harm than good, and the number of officers [with authority to carry weapons] seems to be growing," Stewart said.

One of the first obstacles to any effort to defund the units is determining the exact number of federal agents who have authority to execute search warrants and carry weapons.

"The trend of increasing federal law enforcement powers is unmistakable, but it is extremely difficult to get information on exact numbers," Tim Lynch, director of the Project on Criminal

Justice at the Cato Institute, told Newsmax.

Part of the challenge is that various agencies define their law enforcement officers with different terms, making a computer data search more difficult, and some agencies and departments bristle at the assertion they even have SWAT or paramilitary units.

"The Interior Department tells me that they do not have paramilitary units or SWAT teams. What they do have is a 'special-event tactical unit,' which is essentially the same thing," said Stewart, whose office has issued requests for budget and staffing data from a number of departments and agencies.

The [Bureau of Justice Statistics](#) reported that as of September 2008, federal agencies employed approximately 120,348 full-time law enforcement officers — all of whom were authorized to make arrests and carry firearms. The majority of those agents were employed by the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice.

In 2006, the [Government Accountability Office](#) reported that there were 104 federal civilian law enforcement components whose agents had authority to conduct criminal investigations, execute search warrants, make arrests, or carry firearms.

Those 104 components operated within 14 departments and 28 nondepartmental entities. All of the components cited federal statutes as a primary source of their authority to perform law enforcement functions.

For example, the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#) has a law enforcement unit with an annual budget of \$65 million, which funds as many as 96 special agents and 28 enforcement officers who carry weapons.

According to the [Fish and Wildlife Service](#), its Office of Law Enforcement investigates "wildlife crimes, regulates wildlife trade, helps Americans understand and obey wildlife protections laws," and has an enforcement staff of 261 special agents and about 140 wildlife inspectors.

"Just look back 20 or 30 years. When a regulatory agency had a criminal case, they generally referred the case to the FBI, but what probably happened was that agencies became dissatisfied with the priority the FBI was putting on their cases," Lynch told Newsmax. "So one agency went to Congress seeking greater authority to enforce the law and Congress allowed them to establish a law enforcement unit within the department. At a certain point they simply become part of the overall bureaucracy."

Lynch said that once an armed unit is established within an agency, it is likely to remain indefinitely.

"It is definitely going to be difficult to reverse this trend because we all know from history that it is hard to dislodge something once it gets into the budget appropriations process," Lynch said.

In 2013, Republican Rep. Jeff Duncan of South Carolina expressed concerns about armed agents after seeing officers of the Internal Revenue Service with semi-automatic weapons at a training facility.

In a statement released to [Politico, the IRS](#) defended the practice, stating that "IRS Criminal Investigation Special Agents are equipped similarly to other federal, state and local law enforcement organizations. Special Agents receive training on the appropriate and safe use of assigned weapons. IRS Criminal Investigation has internal controls and oversight in place to ensure all law enforcement tools, including weapons, are used appropriately."

Supporters of defunding certain federal police forces say the responsibility for enforcing regulations or carrying out criminal search warrants is a job best left to local law enforcement officers and sheriffs, who are better equipped to enforce noncriminal laws and are more familiar to local residents.

"There are trained and capable federal marshals, or even better they can call upon local law enforcement officers who often have a better relationship with the citizens involved," Stewart told Newsmax.

The congressman argues that using local law enforcement also will limit the potential for miscommunication and for scenarios seen at Ruby Ridge in Idaho and the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, where federal officials engaged in armed confrontations.

Lynch said federal agencies could call on the FBI if a situation has the potential to turn violent.

"I think the presumption ought to be toward the FBI in a situation in which the signs point to potentially running into people who might become violent. But just like police forces are required to do before executing a search warrant, the agencies should have to make a showing that a raid is justified. If they have to get their ducks in a row before going to the FBI, there will be less chance of agents pursuing flimsy cases just to increase their numbers," he said.

Stewart said his office has not determined the exact route to take through the legislative process, but he has no intention "of waiting around for studies to be conducted" and will be moving the bill in the next few weeks.

Stewart said he has not had to do much "arm-twisting" to generate support for his measure — his colleagues have been approaching him to join as co-sponsors.

He added: "We have definitely struck a nerve."