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**OTTAWA - The Liberal government is considering four main proposals to fix the \$1-billion gun registry -- including reducing or eliminating user fees, extending the renewal period to register guns to 10 years, and handing over management of the registry to the RCMP.**

It is also considering changes to the firearms registry that will address the needs of long gun owners, such as farmers, hunters, fishermen, and aboriginals.

Sources told CanWest News Service that no decisions have been made -- but that these are some of the key recommendations put forward in a recent report by Albina Guarnieri, the associate defence minister, who was asked by Prime Minister Paul Martin to propose solutions to fix the problem-plagued registry.

Discussions are still ongoing between Public Safety Minister Anne McLellan, whose responsibilities include the Canadian Firearms Centre, Minister of Indian Affairs Andy Mitchell and the Prime Minister's Office, sources said.

Liberal insiders say there are no plans for a major gun registry announcement during the anticipated spring election -- something many Western MPs and Liberal candidates are counting on to boost their chances.

But insiders do not rule out an announcement recommending changes to the program in the next two weeks. They caution, however, that an announcement could just as easily be put off until after the election. Mr. Martin is expected to call the election on May 23 for a June 28 trip to the polls.

Ms. Guarnieri, who conducted a cross-country tour hearing representations from about 200 groups and individuals, refused to comment on what she has recommended, but did say she supports the premise of maintaining a gun registry.

However, she acknowledged the solution must take into account that long gun owners -- mostly hunters, aboriginals and farmers -- must be given different considerations than handgun owners.

"We want to recognize the legitimate complaints of farmers, hunters, aboriginals and fishers that have come before me," said Ms. Guarnieri. "There has to be a recognition in the final solution of the realities of this country."

Sources say options include removing long gun owners from the Criminal Code to take away the perception hunters and farmers are no different from criminals. Currently, all

gun owners who fail to comply with the law face criminal charges. By removing owners of long guns, they would instead be subject to a summary conviction or a ticket, sources say.

However, no decision has been made.

On user fees, it is not known which charges are being recommended for reduction or elimination, but sources say any measure would cost the government "millions of dollars" in lost revenues annually, thus increasing the cost of the already out-of-control program.

Government estimates show the cost of the registry, which was estimated to be \$2-million when first implemented, will be \$1-billion by 2005 and will surpass \$2-billion within a few years of that.

The program now costs \$113-million a year to maintain.

User fees have varied dramatically since implementation of the registry, ranging from no charge to as much as \$80, depending on the type of firearm. The government waived fees in recent years as an incentive for owners to register their weapons. There are also a number of other fees charged for applying for a new licence when a firearms certificate expires and for transferring ownership of a firearm.

The current renewal period for a possession and acquisition licence is five years. Ms. Guarnieri's report recommends doubling that to 10 years, sources say.

However, sources add that recommendation would significantly lower revenue and they question the effectiveness of a 10-year licensing program.

Handing over the management of the registry from the Canadian Firearms Centre located in New Brunswick to the RCMP is the most controversial recommendation, although reports estimate at least \$10-million could be saved annually.

Proponents argue the RCMP should deal with registration because police understand weapons and have experience with databases. The Mounties currently operate a DNA and criminal information database -- which have security measures to ensure against the misuse of the confidential information.

Sources say the RCMP is receptive to taking over the registry but the government is undecided as to whether that is the best course of action.

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BCWF ALERT  
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