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If you follow the U.S. Lacey Act.....

The Sydney Morning Herald
Entertainment

Gibson guitars made with government-seized wood are sold out

February 16, 2014



Gibson's Government Series II Les Paul

What does a company do when it retrieves government-confiscated building materials? If that company is Gibson Guitar Corp, it makes guitars from it.

Late last year, the 120-year-old Nashville music company released a limited series of Les Paul, Explorer, SG and Flying V six-string guitars with fingerboards made from wood that federal agents had seized in factory raids. The company produced 750 instruments for that first batch, which quickly sold out. Responding to continued demand, Gibson this year released about 1,000 more Government Series guitars, which sold out "in minutes," according to Chief Executive Henry Juskiewicz. "We kept getting calls, and we had wood left over," said Juskiewicz, 60.

Those who still want to get their hands on a Government Series Gibson guitar might have to resort to eBay, though. The company is out of reclaimed wood. Authorities raided Gibson's Tennessee factories in 2011, taking ebony and rosewood they suspected were illegally imported from India. They were acting to enforce the Lacey Act, passed more than a century ago to stop illegal trade in wildlife and amended in 2008 to ban illegally logged woods.

Juskiewicz's plight became a cause of Republican politicians, conservative commentators, libertarians and tea party activists, who saw the government's move as an example of over-regulation. It was the second time Gibson was targeted on suspicion of the offense. Agents came in 2009 seeking ebony imported from Madagascar.



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There were no charges in either case, and the company and the Department of Justice settled in 2012. But Juskiewicz says the dispute cost the company about \$5 million. When most of the wood was returned, the company decided to put out the guitars made with the seized material. The instruments feature a "vintage-gloss Government Tan" finish, black hardware, the "Government Series" logo and a note of appreciation signed by Juskiewicz. The Les Pauls started at \$1,099.

Gibson's CEO maintains that the release of the special guitars was not a pointed statement at the government but rather a celebration of the dispute's end. "It was intended as a way to say, 'Let's get going and get on with it,' " he said. "We had a lot of public support, which was helpful, if not crucial. We wanted to use this wood, which was symbolic in my eyes."

The National Association of Music Merchants supported Gibson, but not everyone was on the guitar maker's side during the controversy. Guitar maker CF Martin & Co and wood distributor North American Wood Products spoke in support of the Lacey Act amendments, saying they help the environment and American companies.

Still, Juskiewicz said the vast majority of customers supported his outspokenness in response to the raids, though a few discouraged him from getting involved in politics. He is working to change the law by lobbying and making trips to Washington, and he's considering setting up a political action committee, he said. "It's going slowly," he said. "It's a big job and I'm just one guy."

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