

FEDERAL LAW COUNTS...EVEN ON A STATE STOP

**United States v. Steinman
No. 23-1703 (9th Cir. 2025)**

An important 2025 Ninth Circuit decision clarified a question officers often face in the field:

Can a state or local officer rely on suspected federal crimes to establish probable cause, even if the conduct isn't illegal under state law? The answer is yes.

In **United States v. Steinman**, a Nevada state trooper stopped a driver for speeding. While approaching the vehicle, the trooper saw an ammunition box on the floorboard and items covered by a blanket in the back seat. The trooper ran a criminal history check during the stop and learned the defendant had felony convictions. Based on the ammunition, the defendant's felony status, his suspicious movements inside the car, and the covered items, the trooper suspected that the defendant illegally possessed ammunition and firearms. The vehicle was seized and the driver was later charged under federal law with felony possession of ammunition and unregistered firearms.

The defense argued that the evidence should be suppressed because the suspected conduct was not illegal under Nevada state law.

The Ninth Circuit reversed the trial court and made several key points in the decision:

The Fourth Amendment is a federal standard that applies nationwide and is not limited by state criminal statutes.

Federal law violations count – officers may consider suspected federal crimes as part of the totality of circumstances when determining whether probable cause exists under the Fourth Amendment.

State officers aren't barred from enforcing federal law. Unless the state law specifically prohibits it, state and local officers may act on suspected federal violations.

Because the trooper reasonably suspected a federal firearms offense, the seizure was lawful and the evidence should **not** have been suppressed.

Takeaways:

Probable cause can be based on federal law, even during a state traffic stop.

Tip – always evaluate the *totality of the circumstances*, including federal offenses. The bottom line is if the facts support a reasonable belief that a federal crime is occurring, that suspicion can lawfully support a search or seizure, even if the state law does not make the conduct a crime.

Stay Safe and Healthy!