



Department of Justice

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Southern District of Mississippi

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GAUTIER RESIDENTS PLEAD TO DISASTER FISHERIES PROGRAM FRAUD

Gulfport, Miss. – **EDWARD RICE, CATHERINE RICE and SONYA BARTHOLOMEW**, all of Gautier, Mississippi, appeared Thursday, December 4, 2008, before U.S. District Judge Keith Starrett, in Federal Court in Gulfport and entered pleas of guilty to conspiracy to defraud the government in obtaining disaster crabbing benefits from the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources following Hurricane Katrina, U.S. Attorney Dunn Lampton announced today.

As part of the Hurricane Katrina recovery program, the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources administered fishing programs funded by the Department of Commerce through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Commercial fishermen who held licenses before Katrina were eligible to be accepted into the contract program in which participants would be paid \$160.00 per day to for each day of fishing and reporting bycatch and harvest data.

The defendants each face a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison and a \$250,000.00 fine. This case was investigated by Special Agent Kevin George of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Senior Master Sergeant Charles Vyles of the Department of Marine Resources, it was prosecuted by Annette Williams, Assistant United States Attorney.

In September, 2005, then Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales, created the national Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force, designed to deter, investigate and prosecute disaster-related federal crimes such as charity fraud, identity theft, procurement fraud and insurance fraud. The Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force - chaired by Acting Assistant Attorney General for the Criminal Division, Matthew Friedrich, includes members from the Department of Homeland Security, FBI, the Federal Trade Commission, the Department of Labor Office of Inspector General, the Postal Inspector's Office and the Executive Office of United States Attorneys, among others.

Pursuant to the Justice Department initiative, a local Katrina Fraud Task Force, consisting of over 20 Federal and State law enforcement agencies, was formed in the Southern District of Mississippi to pursue and prosecute individuals who engage in fraud associated with the hurricanes.

If anyone has information concerning possible fraud being committed during the post-Katrina recovery effort, please call either the DHS-OIG Fraud Hotline at 1-866-720-5721 or the FBI Fraud Hotline at 1-800-225-5324.

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