



Department of Justice

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Southern District of Mississippi**

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GULFPORT MAN PLEADS GUILTY TO KATRINA FRAUD

Jackson, Miss. - **Merlin W. Winters**, of Gulfport, Mississippi, pled guilty in U.S. District Court today to making a false claim to FEMA for Hurricane Katrina disaster assistance funds, U.S. Attorney Dunn Lampton announced. Winters received \$2,358.00 from FEMA by claiming his primary residence at the time of Hurricane Katrina was in Gulfport, Mississippi. However, Winters admitted that on the day of Hurricane Katrina he was incarcerated by the Mississippi Department of Corrections where he had been an inmate since August of 2004. He was later released by the Mississippi Department of Corrections on November 1, 2005, due to the expiration of his sentence.

Winters is scheduled to be sentenced before U.S. District Judge Louis Guirola, Jr. on September 11, 2008, at 1:30 p.m. He faces a maximum sentence of 5 years in federal prison and a \$250,000 fine. This case was investigated by the United States Department of Agriculture, and prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Jerry Abdalla.

In September, 2005, 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 includes members from the 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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