



PRESS RELEASE

CONTACT: Elizabeth M. Martinez
Executive Assistant U.S. Attorney
Public Affairs Officer
elizabeth.martinez@usdoj.gov
505.224.1469

For Immediate Release

July 20, 2012

**TWENTY-THREE INDIVIDUALS CHARGED AS A RESULT OF JOINT ATF-
FARMINGTON GANG UNIT INVESTIGATION IN SAN JUAN COUNTY**

ALBUQUERQUE – Twenty-three individuals have been charged as the result of the “Farmington Project,” a year-long investigation into violations of the federal firearms laws in San Juan County, N.M., by the Albuquerque Field Office of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms & Explosives (ATF) and the Farmington Gang Unit. Sixteen are charged with violating the federal firearms laws in federal indictments that were returned under seal by a federal grand jury on July 10, 2012. Seven are charged with violating state criminal laws.

During the course of the investigation, undercover agents and officers purchased firearms from individuals who were precluded from possessing them because they previously had been convicted of felony offenses. The undercover agents and officers purchased 32 firearms, including several with obliterated or altered serial numbers, and quantities of methamphetamine during the investigation.

On July 17, 2012, officers from ATF, the Farmington Gang Unit, the U.S. Marshal’s Service, the San Juan County Sheriff’s Office, the Farmington Police Department and the Bloomfield Police Department participated in a county-wide enforcement operation and arrested nine federal defendants and five state defendants. The federal defendants are scheduled for arraignments and detention hearings in federal court in Albuquerque this morning.

In addition to those arrested on July 17, 2012, five defendants who are facing federal charges are currently in state custody on local charges; they will be transferred to federal custody to face the federal charges. Three federal defendants and one state defendant have yet to be apprehended and are considered fugitives.

Most of the federal defendants are charged with being felons in possession of firearms and ammunition. A conviction for that offense carries a maximum penalty of a ten-year term of imprisonment.

The results of the investigation and the July 17, 2012 enforcement operation were announced by U.S. Attorney Kenneth J. Gonzales, Thomas G. Atteberry, Special Agent in Charge of ATF’s Phoenix Field Division, U.S. Marshal Conrad E. Candelaria, San Juan County

Sheriff Ken Christensen, Bloomfield Police Chief Michael R. Kovacs, and Farmington Police Commander Cliff Washburn during a press conference this morning.

In announcing the results of the investigation, U.S. Attorney Gonzales said, “The federal firearms laws are some of the most valuable tools in the federal law enforcement toolbox for implementing the Department of Justice’s anti-violence strategy in the District of New Mexico and meeting the public safety needs of our communities. In particular, the felon in possession statute enables federal law enforcement agencies to work with their state and local partners to target repeat offenders for federal prosecution so that they can be removed from our communities while they serve significant prison sentences. The Farmington Project is just one example of how the law enforcement community is working together to make our neighborhoods safer places for our citizens to live, work and raise families, and send children to school.”

“The completion of this proactive long-term investigation displays our unified resolve to ensure that the good people in Farmington, Bloomfield and San Juan County, New Mexico, are free from the scourge of violent crime,” said ATF Special Agent in Charge Atteberry. “Let these arrests serve as a reminder to those that continue to engage in drug and gun dealing. We will persevere in our efforts to make our streets safe for law-abiding residents. They deserve to go about their lives without the fear of violence.”

U.S. Marshal Candelaria said, “The apprehension of dangerous fugitives, especially those involved in firearms-related crimes, is at the core of the Marshals Service Southwest Investigative Fugitive Team (SWIFT) Task Force mission. By partnering with federal, state and local law enforcement agencies in operations such as the Farmington Project, the Marshals Service for the District of New Mexico is able to make an impact on the overall safety of New Mexico communities.”

“San Juan County law enforcement is honored to have such good federal partners that believe that getting dangerous criminals off the streets is not just a local problem, but a threat to our nation,” said San Juan County Sheriff Christesen. “We appreciate the effort that the ATF and the U.S. Attorney’s Office gives to San Juan County.”

Bloomfield Police Chief Kovacs added, “The Bloomfield Police Department is proud to be part of the cooperative regional law enforcement response that the residents of San Juan County, including the residents of Bloomfield, deserve and have come to expect. When we work together like we did during this operation, the positive impact on our communities cannot be overstated.”

“The success of this operation is yet another example of how local communities benefit from coordinated efforts involving local state and federal law enforcement. The Farmington Police Department welcomes federal assistance in apprehending and removing career criminals from our communities and look forward to continued success in that regard,” said Commander Cliff Washburn of the Farmington Police Department.

The cases generated by this investigation were investigated by the ATF and the Farmington Gang Unit of the HIDTA Region II Narcotics Task Force. The HIDTA Region II Narcotics Task Force is comprised of officers from the San Juan County Sheriff's Office, the Farmington Police Department, and the Bloomfield Police Department. HIDTA, the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area Program, is funded by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy.

The federal cases are being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Louis E. Valencia, Kimberly A. Brawley, David M. Walsh, and Norman Cairns, and the state cases are being prosecuted by the District Attorney's Office for the 11th Judicial District of New Mexico (San Juan County).

Charges in indictments are only accusations. All criminal defendants are presumed innocent unless proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

###

12-184