



# Department of Justice

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

03/12/09

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## **FORMER FUGITIVE MARIJUANA GROWER** **SENTENCED TO LIFE IN PRISON**

### *Over 1,000 Plant Operation Used National Forest Land*

Gainesville, GA - ANDREW N. COX, 45, formerly of Blairsville, Georgia, was sentenced today by Senior United States District Judge William C. O'Kelley to serve life in prison on charges of conspiring to manufacture and attempt to manufacture marijuana in and around the Chattahoochee National Forest in north Georgia in the spring of 2004.

United States Attorney David E. Nahmias said of today's sentence, "This defendant was a twice-convicted drug trafficker who has now received his third and final strike. His life sentence is just punishment for a career in the illegal drug trade, which most recently led him to exploit and degrade national forest land. He will have no more chances to poison our communities with illegal drugs, and his sentence should send a message that our national forests are not a safe haven for crime. The U.S. Forest Service is to be commended for its hard work in this difficult prosecution, made even more challenging by the passage of time while this defendant was a fugitive."

"On behalf of the U.S. Forest Service, Law Enforcement & Investigations, I would like to thank the U.S. Attorney's Office and our partners in law enforcement for their efforts in bringing this five year old case to a close. This case exemplifies our continuing effort to ensure our National Forests are safe for our public," said Steven F. Ruppert, Special Agent in Charge, USDA - Forest Service, Southern Region.

COX was sentenced to federal prison for life. There is no parole in the federal justice system. COX was convicted of these charges on November 18, 2008, after a nearly four-day jury trial.

Although the charges ordinarily carry a mandatory minimum sentence of ten years in prison, COX was subjected to an enhanced mandatory minimum sentence of life in prison because he had two prior felony convictions for drug trafficking, a 1991 conviction in state court in Indian River County, Florida, and a 2000 federal conviction in the Middle District of Georgia.

According to United States Attorney Nahmias and the information presented in court: Beginning in early 2004 and continuing through July 2004, COX entered into a marijuana manufacturing conspiracy with three other men, JOSE QUEZADAS-FIERROS, PACIANO VARGAS-HERNANDEZ, and MAYOLO VARGAS-VILLENUEVA. COX hired the three men to plant and cultivate marijuana on private and U.S. Forest Service property using a landscaping company as a front, and using private property owned by COX's father as a staging area to begin growing seedlings in hundreds of plastic starter cups. The co-conspirators then prepared three marijuana grow sites on private and public land, destroying underbrush and trees to do so, and transplanted the seedlings into the forest. During their investigation U.S. Forest Service agents discovered 724 seedlings in the yard of COX's father's property and an additional 594 plants at three separate grow sites in the adjacent forest, ranging in maturity from 3 to 4 inches to 4 ½ feet tall, for a total of 1,318 plants. COX was originally indicted for the offense on January 11, 2005, but fled after he was indicted and remained a federal fugitive until he was captured in Casa Grande, Arizona more than three years later, on February 13, 2008.

The co-conspirators - QUEZADAS-FIERROS, VARGAS-HERNANDEZ, and VARGAS-VILLENUEVA - were indicted and pleaded guilty to related charges in 2004 and 2006. QUEZADAS-FIERROS was sentenced to 3 years in federal prison; VARGAS-HERNANDEZ was sentenced to 2 years in federal prison; and VARGAS-VILLENUEVA was sentenced to 5 years, 6 months in federal prison.

The U.S. Attorney's Office in Atlanta recommends parents and children learn about the dangers of drugs at the following web site: [www.justthinktwice.com](http://www.justthinktwice.com).

This case was investigated by the United States Forest Service, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the United States Marshals Service. Assistance in this case has also been provided by the Georgia National Guard and the (Georgia) Governor's Drug Task Force.

Assistant United States Attorney David M. Chaiken prosecuted the case.

For further information please contact David E. Nahmias (pronounced NAH-me-us), United States Attorney, or Charysse L. Alexander, Executive Assistant United States Attorney, through Patrick Crosby, Public Affairs Officer, U.S. Attorney's Office, at (404) 581-6016. The Internet address for the HomePage for the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Georgia is [www.usdoj.gov/usao/gan](http://www.usdoj.gov/usao/gan).