



Department of Justice

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“HOOKED ON PONICS” DEFENDANTS SENTENCED

Three Dozen Marijuana Grow Houses Had Advanced Hydroponic Systems

Atlanta, GA— Four more key defendants were sentenced today by Chief United States District Judge Julie E. Carnes in the marijuana investigation code-named “Hooked On ‘Ponics,” which netted 36 so-called “grow houses” and 24 defendants with the marijuana’s street value totaling over \$3.5 million.

United States Attorney David E. Nahmias said of today’s sentencings, “These four now join many of their co-conspirators already in federal prison, where there is no parole, but there is plenty of artificial light. That’s what these defendants were using in Georgia’s most elaborate and widespread hydroponic marijuana growing scheme. They set up a widespread and stealthy operation, but local, state and federal agencies worked well together to track and arrest the defendants in a complex case that extended across our district.”

HIDTA Director Jack C. Killorin said, “Collaborative investigation and aggressive prosecution have won a major victory with ‘Hooked on ‘Ponics.’ While we stay watchful, this case appears to have driven this organized criminal activity out of Georgia. Criminals who sought to produce illegal drugs in our neighborhoods have found Georgia the wrong neighborhood to try it in.”

Rodney G. Benson, Special Agent in Charge of the DEA Atlanta Field Division said, “While these defendants used the quiet, suburban lifestyle as a cover to advance their high-grade marijuana operation, their efforts were eliminated by the hard work and dedication of numerous federal, state and local law enforcement agencies. It is DEA’s duty to keep our communities safe from the scourge of drug abuse. Many U.S. communities are now safer because these criminals have been removed from the streets.”

Fayette County Sheriff Wayne Hannah said, “This investigation was massive in its scope and law enforcement and prosecutorial personnel worked together to dismantle this organization without the territorial disputes which have plagued so many other agencies and cases in the past. The members of the Sheriff’s Tactical Narcotics Team (formerly the Sheriff’s Drug Suppression Task Force) and I were truly impressed by the cooperation they

received from the various local agencies, as well as authorities from both the federal and state level. This investigation, with the level of cooperation received, sets the example of how investigations of this magnitude can be investigated and brought to a successful conclusion.”

Walton County Sheriff Joe Chapman said, “This was a major criminal operation that hopefully has been eradicated from Georgia. I am still amazed at the number of agencies that worked together to make this operation successful.”

FRANCISCO HERNANDEZ, 46, of Miami, Florida, was sentenced to 60 months in prison; ADALBERTO HERNANDEZ-CRUZ, 32, of Miami, Florida, was sentenced to 24 months in prison; JESUS ALEMAN RUBIO, 56, of Lehigh Acres, Florida, was sentenced to 24 months in prison; and CARLOS HURTADO O’CAMPO, 42, of West Palm Beach, Florida, was sentenced to 20 months in prison. There is no parole in the federal system. The sentences will all be followed by 2-3 years of supervised release.

According to U.S. Attorney Nahmias and evidence presented in court: The investigation of this case began in January 2007, based on a tip to law enforcement. Through physical surveillance and multiple search warrants, numerous cooperating law enforcement agencies identified and dismantled 36 active marijuana grow houses in a 13-county area. These grow houses were extensively modified, and the majority of the residences were located in upper-middle class residential neighborhoods.

In general, the basement in each residence contained “grow” areas and an electrical and water supply control area. The basement walls and ceilings were covered with reflective board insulation, and all joints were sealed with aluminum duct tape. All of the outside windows and doors were sealed and walled over so that there was no access into the area from outside. Before the windows were walled over, they were painted with white paint and/or had blinds installed on them.

Often, the “grow areas” were equipped with two HVAC air-handlers, which were serviced by a single condensing unit located outside the residence. The HVAC systems were operated by diverted power obtained through an illegal tap on the main feed line located approximately 4 feet underground next to the concrete driveway. The diverted power breaker panel was constructed in an sophisticated manner, and contained numerous electrical switches, relays, timers and outlets.

Additionally, large plastic open tanks contained in metal baskets with electric powered sump pumps in the control room supplied water-soluble nutrients to each plant via a network of PVC piping and tubing. Each plant was grown in a black 5 gallon bucket and was supplied water-soluble nutrients via plastic tubes, which allowed the nutrients to flow to the root structure of each plant and then drain into a return drainage system for re-circulation. The 5 gallon grow buckets were elevated off the floor by a 2x4 wood constructed platform system

with the PVC drain pipe system located underneath it. A timer was used to maximize the supply of water-soluble nutrients to the plants on a regular cycle.

During the investigation, agents seized 8,841 marijuana plants and 1,565 pounds of processed marijuana. The marijuana has a street value of \$3,514,000. Three of the defendants remain fugitives.

Previously, 17 other co-defendants in the scheme were sentenced in federal court: MERQUIADES MARTINEZ, 36, of Fayetteville, Georgia, was sentenced to 120 months in prison; BLANCA BOTELLO, 35, of Fayetteville, Georgia, was sentenced to 37 months in prison; JUAN CARLOS MARTIN-LOPEZ, 38, of Loganville, Georgia, was sentenced to 120 months in prison; GERSON CARRANZA, 26, of Monroe, Georgia, was sentenced to 24 months in prison; RAMON AGUILA-RAMOS, 41, of Miami, Florida, was sentenced to 24 months in prison; STANLEY CASTILLO, 41, of Miami, Florida, was sentenced to 21 months in prison; NESTOR RAPHAEL GARCIA-JIMINEZ, 36, of Fayetteville, Georgia, was sentenced to 24 months in prison; LUIS GUARRO-PONCE, 38, of McDonough, Georgia, was sentenced to 24 months in prison; JUAN GUEVARRA-MILIAN, 37, of Hialeah, Florida, was sentenced to 20 months in prison; REINALDO VICTOR PARDO, 61, of Homestead, Florida, was sentenced to 24 months in prison; FRESNIO JORGE PEREZ, 54, of Conyers, Georgia, was sentenced to 24 months in prison; EDUARDO REY, 34, of Miami, Florida, was sentenced to 21 months in prison; MARIO RUBIO, 36, of Hialeah, Florida, was sentenced to 34 months in prison; JOSE RAMON VALDIVIA, 59, of Moreland, Georgia, was sentenced to 24 months in prison; WENCESLAO SANTIESTEBAN, 44, of Hialeah, Florida, was sentenced to 60 months in prison; JESUS SOTO-BAEZ, 31, of Miami, Florida, was sentenced to 24 months in prison; and TOMAS VALIENTE, 41, of Hialeah, Florida, was sentenced to 24 months in prison.

This investigation was initiated by the Fayette County Sheriff's Office Drug Task Force and subsequently coordinated through the Atlanta High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) Task Force. The agencies who participated in the investigation were the Drug Enforcement Administration (Atlanta and Miami Divisions), Internal Revenue Service, Barrow County Sheriff's Office, Butts County Sheriff's Office, Coweta County Sheriff's Office, East Metro Drug Enforcement, Forsyth County Sheriff's Office, Gainesville Police Department, Georgia State Patrol, Gwinnett County Drug Task Force, Hall County Gang Task Force, Hall County Sheriff's Office/MANNS Unit, Henry County Police Department Drug Unit, Hialeah Police Department Narcotics, Jackson County Sheriff's Office, Jasper County Sheriff's Office, Jones County Sheriff's Office, Newton County Sheriff's Office, Rockdale County Sheriff's Office, Walton County Sheriff's Office, and the District Attorneys' Offices for the Alcovy Judicial Circuit, Coweta Judicial Circuit, Gwinnett County Judicial Circuit, Griffin Judicial Circuit, Northeastern Judicial Circuit, Piedmont Judicial Circuit, Ocmulgee Judicial Circuit, Rockdale Judicial Circuit and Towaliga Judicial Circuit.

Assistant United States Attorneys Lisa W. Tarvin and Cassandra J. Schansman 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.