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News Release

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12 individuals plead guilty as a result of Operation Pitchfork

MINNEAPOLIS – After a year-long law enforcement investigation, known as Operation Pitchfork, 12 individuals have pleaded guilty in connection with drug-trafficking operations in the Twin Cities. Yesterday in federal court, just before his trial was scheduled to begin, Luis A. Mendoza-Cabrera, of St. Paul, pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to distribute 50 or more grams of methamphetamine. Mendoza-Cabrera, age 24, entered his plea before United States District Court Judge Joan N. Ericksen. Mendoza-Cabrera, who was indicted along with 11 co-defendants on February 24, 2011, entered a plea without a written plea agreement. Two of his co-defendants are fugitives, while the other nine already have pleaded guilty to roles in the drug operation.

In entering his plea this morning, Mendoza-Cabrera admitted that on March 10, 2010, in St. Paul, he assisted co-defendant Andres Vasquez-Avila by delivering 12.8 grams of methamphetamine to customers. In addition, he admitted that on March 31, 2010, he again assisted Vasquez-Avila by delivering 49.3 grams of methamphetamine to customers.

On August 12, 2011, Esteban Sanchez Diaz, age 41, of Minneapolis, pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy in connection to the operation. In his plea agreement, he admitted that between 2008 and February 24, 2011, he conspired with others to distribute methamphetamine in the Twin Cities. On February 28, 2011, authorities seized one ounce of methamphetamine and two handguns from Diaz's residence.

On August 3, 2011, Rigoberto Busto-Magaran, age 32, of St. Paul, pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy. In his plea agreement, Busto-Magaran admitted being a distributor in the operation, and that he obtained methamphetamine from various suppliers. He also admitted being responsible for distributing between 500-1,500 grams of methamphetamine.

On July 15, 2011, Trevor James Ryan, age 28, of Moose Lake, pleaded guilty to one count of possession with intent to distribute five or more grams of methamphetamine. In his plea agreement, Ryan admitted that on June 2, 2010, he was in a vehicle, along with two co-defendants, when it was stopped by police for speeding. During the stop, officers seized 13.5 grams of methamphetamine.

On June 24, 2011, Jose Hernandez-Bustos, age 41, of St. Paul, pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy. In his plea agreement, Hernandez-Bustos admitted that he assisted Busto-Magaran by delivering methamphetamine to customers, and distributed methamphetamine on June 15, July 6, and October 19, 2010, and on January 29, 2011.

On June 22, 2011, Rene Correa Sanchez, age 29, of Minneapolis, pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy. In his plea agreement, Sanchez admitted being a distributor during the conspiracy, and that he received drugs from various suppliers.

On June 3, 2011, Jessica Lynn Nelson, age 28, of Shakopee, pleaded guilty to one count of possession with intent to distribute five or more grams of methamphetamine. In her plea agreement, Nelson admitted that on June 2, 2010, she was in a vehicle, along with two co-defendants, when it was stopped by police for speeding. During the stop, officers seized 13.5 grams of methamphetamine, which she tried to hide in her underwear.

On April 27, 2011, Andres Vasquez-Avila, age 33, of St. Paul, pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy. In his plea agreement, Vasquez-Avila admitted that he was a customer of Busto-Magaran, and that he distributed the drugs he purchased from Busto-Magaran. In addition, Vasquez-Avila admitted distributing methamphetamine on February 19, March 10, March 18, March 31, April 22, and April 28, 2010.

On April 15, 2011, Porfirio Talavera-Blanco, age 41, of St. Paul, pleaded guilty to one count of possession with intent to distribute five or more grams of methamphetamine. In his plea agreement, Talavera-Blanco admitted that on February 23, 2011, he delivered approximately two ounces of methamphetamine to customers.

On April 14, 2011, Miguel Farid Soto-Chavez, age 24, no known address, pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy. In his plea agreement, Soto-Chavez admitted assisting Busto-Magaran, and distributed methamphetamine on February 5, March 3, March 31, and April 20, 2010.

In a related case charged separately, on July 20, 2011, a 35-year-old man was sentenced to 240 months in prison on one count of possession with intent to distribute methamphetamine. Alfonso Perez-Robles, no known address, was indicted on February 24, 2011, and pleaded guilty on May 10, 2011. He was sentenced by U.S. District Court Judge David S. Doty. In his plea agreement, Perez-Robles admitted that on September 9, 2010, he possessed with intent to distribute 50 or more grams of methamphetamine. According to a law enforcement affidavit filed in the case, on September 9, 2010, Perez-Robles was stopped on U.S. Highway 52 for a traffic violation. During a consent search of his vehicle, officers found approximately one pound of methamphetamine concealed in a plastic bag under the front passenger seat. Perez-Robles was immediately arrested. At the time of his arrest, Perez-Robles was awaiting sentencing in the District of Minnesota on a cocaine conspiracy charge. In connection to that charge, Perez-Robles was sentenced on September 14, 2010, to 70 months in prison.

Also in a related case charged separately, on May 2, 2011, Miguel Angel Soto-Pina, age 49, of St. Paul, pleaded guilty to one count of illegal re-entry after deportation. He was indicted on February 24, 2011, after being identified as an associate of Busto-Magaran. In his plea agreement, Soto-Pina admitted that on June 11, 2010, he was found in the U.S. illegally after having been previously deported to Mexico. His deportation followed a 2009 Minnesota conviction for first-degree sale of a controlled substance.

For their crimes, the defendants face a potential maximum penalty of life in prison with a mandatory minimum penalty of ten years on the conspiracy count; a potential maximum penalty of 40 years with a mandatory minimum penalty of five years on the possession with intent to distribute count; and Soto-Pina faces a potential maximum penalty of 20 years. Their sentences will be determined by a U.S. District Court Judge at a future hearing, yet to be scheduled.

The investigations in these cases were conducted by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, the St. Paul Police Department, the Ramsey County Sheriff's Office, the Hennepin County Sheriff's Office, the Bloomington Police Department, the Minnesota State Patrol, and the Sherburne County Sheriff's Office, with assistance from the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations and the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. The investigations occurred in California and Minnesota. So far, authorities have seized nearly two pounds of methamphetamine, approximately \$350,000 in cash, two handguns, and a vehicle.

All three of these cases are being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Thomas M. Hollenhorst.

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