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News Release

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Local man involved in national drug trafficking operation sentenced to 110 months in federal prison

MINNEAPOLIS – Earlier today in federal court, a 32-year-old Isanti man was sentenced for his role in a drug-trafficking conspiracy. United States District Court Judge John R. Tunheim sentenced Benjamin Michael Saxton to 110 months in prison on one count of conspiracy to distribute 50 or more grams of methamphetamine. Saxton was indicted, along with three co-defendants, on October 19, 2009. He pleaded guilty on February 23, 2010.

The four defendants in this case were arrested in October of 2009 as part of “Project Coronado,” a nation-wide investigation into the drug trafficking operation of La Familia, a violent drug cartel based in southwestern Mexico. At that time, more than 3,000 law enforcement officers across the country participated in a two-day takedown that resulted in arrests in 19 states. To date, the 44-month investigation has yielded 1,186 arrests and the seizure of \$32.8 million in U.S. currency as well as the recovery of 2,710 pounds of methamphetamine, 1,999 kilograms of cocaine, 29 pounds of heroin, 16,390 pounds of marijuana, 389 weapons, and 269 vehicles. In the local case, one of the defendant’s sources of drugs was tied to La Familia. During the course of the investigation of Saxton, authorities seized approximately \$62,500 in cash and several vehicles used to traffic drugs, including a 2004 Jaguar, 2010 Chevrolet Camaro, a 1984 Harley-Davidson motorcycle, and a 2001 Minnesota Custom Cycle Trails motorcycle.

Following today’s sentencing, B. Todd Jones, U.S. Attorney for the District of Minnesota, said, “These Mexican drug cartels are responsible not only for the distribution of large quantities of illegal drugs but for unprecedented violence here in the United States as well as in Mexico. Those Minnesotans who choose to work with them will be prosecuted to the fullest extent under the law.”

Dan Moren, Assistant Special Agent in Charge of the Minneapolis-St. Paul District Office of the DEA, added, “La Familia Michoacana is a violent drug cartel and organized crime

syndicate that continues to impact not only the state of Minnesota but the United States as a whole. Those sentenced today must now atone for pledging their support to an organization that embraces murder, torture, and kidnapping as a means of conducting business in furtherance of distributing the highly addictive drug methamphetamine.”

In his plea agreement, Saxton admitted that from June of 2008 through October of 2009, he conspired with others to distribute methamphetamine. In addition, Saxton admitted that on November 20, 2008, he distributed approximately 40.4 grams of methamphetamine in two separate transactions and possessed with intent to distribute approximately 166.9 grams of the drug. Saxton also admitted distributing approximately 14.1 grams of methamphetamine on April 14, 2009, and approximately 27.2 grams of methamphetamine on June 2, 2009.

On January 13, 2011, Judge Tunheim sentenced co-defendant Jordan Thomas Murray, age 28, of Coon Rapids, to 70 months in prison on one count of conspiracy to distribute five or more grams of methamphetamine. Murray pleaded guilty on February 10, 2010. In his plea agreement, Murray admitted that on March 19, 2009, he distributed approximately 22.4 grams of methamphetamine. In addition, Murray admitted that in total, he distributed between 20 and 35 grams of methamphetamine.

On June 30, 2010, co-defendant Sara Jo Bloomquist, age 31, of Garrison, was sentenced to 60 months in prison on one count of conspiracy to distribute 50 or more grams of methamphetamine. Bloomquist pleaded guilty on February 2, 2010. In her plea agreement, she admitted packaging, preparing, transporting, and distributing methamphetamine. Bloomquist also admitted that on October 21, 2009, she possessed with intent to distribute approximately five ounces of methamphetamine.

On November 23, 2010, co-defendant Luke Robert Peterson, age 30, of Cedar, was sentenced to 120 months on one count of conspiracy to distribute 50 or more grams of methamphetamine. He pleaded guilty on January 19, 2010. In his plea agreement, Peterson admitted that he and his co-defendants were responsible for the distribution of between 150 and 500 grams of methamphetamine during the course of the conspiracy. In addition, Peterson admitted acquiring the methamphetamine as well as being involved in the preparation and distribution of it. He also admitted collecting the cash proceeds from the sales.

This case is the result of an investigation by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, the St. Paul Police Department, the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, the Minneapolis Police Department, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Ramsey County Sheriff's Office, the East Metro Narcotics Task Force, the Anoka-Hennepin Narcotics and Violent Crimes Task Force, and the Lakes Area Drug Investigation Team, with assistance from the U.S. Marshals Service, the Isanti Police Department, the Proctor Police Department, the Hennepin County Sheriff's Office, the Dakota County Drug Task Force, the Washington County Drug Task Force, the Crow Wing County Sheriff's Office, the Isanti County Sheriff's Office, the Pine County Sheriff's Office, the Sherburne County Sheriff's Office and the Buffalo Ridge Gang and Drug Task Force. It was prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Jeffrey M. Bryan.

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