



Department of Justice

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TWO MORE PLEAD GUILTY IN BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA, ON DISASTER RELIEF FRAUD CHARGES

BATON ROUGE, LA – Two more Louisiana residents pled guilty in federal court yesterday on fraud charges related to a hurricane disaster relief program, United States Attorney David R. Dugas announced today.

JOEL J. BRANCH, age 33, of Jonesville, Louisiana, pled guilty yesterday before U.S. District Court Judge James J. Brady to Count One of an indictment charging him with making a false and fraudulent claim for disaster assistance benefits. The case was investigated by the U.S. Postal Inspection Service. As a result of his guilty plea to Count One, BRANCH faces a maximum sentence of five (5) years imprisonment, a \$250,000 fine, or both. As part of the plea agreement, the U.S. Attorney's Office will dismiss Count Two of the indictment when BRANCH is sentenced on Count One.

ARETHA L. MORRIS, age 26, of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, also pled guilty yesterday before U.S. District Court Judge James J. Brady to Count One of an indictment charging her with making a false claim for disaster assistance benefits. The case was investigated by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Office of Inspector General. As a result of her guilty plea, MORRIS faces a maximum sentence of five (5) years imprisonment, a \$250,000 fine, or both. As part of the plea agreement, the U.S. Attorney's Office will dismiss Count Two of the indictment when MORRIS is sentenced on Count One.

The number of individuals who have been charged in the Middle District of Louisiana with violations related to hurricane disaster relief funds stands at one hundred thirty.

In September 2005, Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales created the Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force, designed to deter, investigate and prosecute disaster-related federal crimes such as charity fraud, identity theft, procurement fraud and insurance fraud. The Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force – chaired by Assistant Attorney General Alice S. Fisher of the Criminal Division – includes the FBI, the U.S. Inspectors General community, the U.S. Secret Service, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, the Executive Office for United States Attorneys and others.

For further information, contact David R. Dugas, U.S. Attorney for the Middle District of Louisiana, or Lyman Thornton, First Assistant U.S. Attorney, at (225) 389-0443. Anyone suspecting criminal activity involving disaster assistance programs can make an anonymous report by calling the toll-free Hurricane Relief Fraud Hotline, 1-866-720-5721, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, until further notice. Information can also be emailed to the Hurricane

Katrina Fraud Task Force at HKFTF@leo.gov or sent by surface mail, with as many details as possible, to Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force, Baton Rouge, LA 70821-4909.

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