



# Department of Justice

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## **FUGITIVE MARIJUANA GROWER CONVICTED BY FEDERAL JURY**

### ***Former Blairsville Resident Faces Mandatory Life Sentence For 1,000-Plus Plant Operation That Involved Use Of National Forest Land***

Gainesville, GA - Late yesterday afternoon, a jury in federal district court returned a guilty verdict against ANDREW N. COX, 45, of Blairsville, Georgia on charges of conspiring to manufacture and attempting to manufacture marijuana in and around the Chattahoochee National Forest in north Georgia in the spring of 2004. The evidence presented at trial showed that COX, who was originally indicted on January 11, 2005, fled after he was indicted and remained a fugitive until he was apprehended by authorities in Casa Grande, Arizona more than three years later, on February 13, 2008.

United States Attorney David E. Nahmias said of the verdict, "With tightened border security, America's national forests are a battleground in our fight against the illegal drug business. This verdict sends a message to all who exploit and destroy our natural resources to profit off of the illegal domestic drug trade, and those who flee from justice. We will find you, and then we will prosecute you to the full extent of the law. The U.S. Forest Service should be commended for its outstanding work in a difficult investigation."

Russ Arthur, Supervisory Special Agent, United States Department of Agriculture, United States Forest Service, Law Enforcement & Investigations Unit, said of the jury's verdict, "This case exemplifies the importance of multiple agency cooperation. Our limited resources, compounded with the complexity of this case, made this positive outcome extremely difficult. We sincerely appreciate the level of support from all local, state and federal agencies who came to our aid."

According to United States Attorney Nahmias and the information presented in court: Between early 2004 through July 2004, COX conspired in 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.

The co-conspirators – QUEZADAS-FIERROS, VARGAS-HERNANDEZ, and VARGAS-VILLENUEVA – were indicted and pleaded guilty to related charges in 2004 and 2006.

Because COX has two prior felony drug convictions and the jury found that the conspiracy involved at least 1,000 marijuana plants, COX faces a mandatory life sentence for this crime. There is no parole in the federal justice system. Sentencing is scheduled for February 6, 2009, at 10:00 a.m. before Senior United States District Judge William C. O'Kelley at the United States Courthouse in Gainesville, Georgia.

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, with the assistance of the Appalachian Drug Task Force. Additional assistance was provided by the Casa Grande, Arizona Police Department.

Assistant United States Attorney David M. Chaiken is prosecuting 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).