



# Department of Justice

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## **NORTHWEST GEORGIA AND TENNESSEE** **DRUG DISTRIBUTORS SENTENCED TO FEDERAL PRISON**

### *Defendants Were Affiliated With Mexican Suppliers*

Rome, GA - JOSE HERNANDEZ, 40, originally from Mexico, VANCE ROGERS, 50, of Old Fort, Tennessee, and PAUL FAULKNER, 83, of Summerville, Georgia, were sentenced today as the last defendants in a large group now sentenced to federal prison for their roles in importing and distributing drugs in the North Georgia area, including Chattooga, Whitfield, Floyd, Gordon, and Murray Counties, as well as Polk County, Tennessee.

United States Attorney David E. Nahmias said of the case, "The arrest and prosecution of these traffickers has significantly disrupted the flow of illegal drugs in Northwest Georgia. They were responsible for much of the marijuana being distributed in Chattooga County and surrounding areas, as well as a significant quantity of cocaine and methamphetamine. The lengthy sentences imposed should signal to others considering this path, or already on this path, that such criminal conduct ultimately leads to a prison cell."

Rodney G. Benson, Special Agent in Charge of the DEA Atlanta Field Division said of the sentencings, "This organization's marijuana trafficking activities posed a significant threat to the quality of life in rural North Georgia and in Polk County, Tennessee. These individuals will spend well-deserved time in prison and the communities that they impacted are much safer. I commend our local law enforcement counterparts who played a crucial role in the success of this investigation."

IRS-Criminal Investigation Special Agent in Charge Reginael McDaniel said, "Narcotics trafficking generates huge amounts of currency that must be concealed using elaborate money laundering schemes and other sophisticated means. Following the money trail takes us to the leaders of the narcotics organizations. Leaders of drug trafficking organizations often don't touch the drugs, but they always touch the money."

GBI Director Vernon Keenan said, “Cases such as these cannot be effectively investigated without the cooperation of local, state and federal agencies working together to improve the quality of life for Georgians impacted by these poly-drug organizations. Today's marijuana distributor may be tomorrow's methamphetamine manufacturer. Whether it's in northeast Georgia or southwest Georgia, success in investigating these types of cases requires a highly skilled work force, a cooperative spirit and a common goal to seek the truth.”

HERNANDEZ was sentenced to 20 years in federal prison to be followed by 10 years of supervised release. ROGERS was sentenced to 3 years and 10 months in federal prison to be followed by 3 years of supervised release. FAULKNER was sentenced to 20 years in federal prison to be followed by 10 years of supervised release. There is no parole in the federal system.

According to United States Attorney Nahmias and the information in court: The Drug Enforcement Administration, Georgia Bureau of Investigation, and the Internal Revenue Service-Criminal Investigation began investigating this drug trafficking organization in 2005, initially focusing on members of a local family who reportedly had been distributing marijuana in Chattooga County and the surrounding areas for nearly two decades. The investigation ultimately determined that those family members, including PAUL FAULKNER, his son, MICHAEL SMITH, and his grandson, JAMES FAULKNER, had distributed hundreds of kilograms of marijuana during that time, and had accumulated numerous assets with the drug sales proceeds, including nearly 40 properties with a total value of more than \$1 million.

MICHAEL SMITH, the primary marijuana distributor, took elaborate steps to avoid detection by law enforcement. SMITH resided on an isolated, multi-acre property where he could observe law enforcement approaching. He buried marijuana in ammunition cans scattered on his property, which customers would unearth and replace with money. SMITH communicated with his customers by use of a pager system.

As the investigation expanded, law enforcement learned that the family was being supplied by a group having ties to Mexico. This group, headed by convicted co-conspirator GERONIMO GASTELUM, moved to North Georgia from California in approximately 2005, and began to supply multi-kilogram quantities of drugs in the area, including methamphetamine, cocaine, and marijuana. The drugs were brought to North Georgia from California, Arizona, and Texas by various means, including tractor trailer. The drug organization hired individuals to pick up drugs in vehicles equipped with tires packed with marijuana. GASTELUM and several of his co-conspirators have ties to Mexico, which is believed to be the ultimate source of the drugs imported and where much of the cash proceeds were returned.

Law enforcement ultimately arrested 10 members of the organization. All pleaded guilty to drug distribution and money-laundering charges. The defendants previously

sentenced in the case received the following sentences:

- GERONIMO GASTELUM, 34, of Kerman, California was sentenced to 14 years in federal prison;
- MICHAEL SMITH, 46, of Summerville, Georgia, was sentenced to 9 years in federal prison, and, agreed to forfeit the properties that he had purchased with drug proceeds;
- RUSSELL BRONSON, 51, of Endicott, New York, was sentenced to 7 years, 3 months in federal prison;
- BILL ALAN GARRETT, 52, of Tennga, Georgia, was sentenced to 4 years, 3 months in federal prison;
- JESUS MENDEZ, 23, of Smithfield, North Carolina, was sentenced to 6 years, 3 months in federal prison;
- MICHAEL WALLIN, 39, of LaFayette, Georgia, was sentenced to 4 years in federal prison; and
- JAMES FAULKNER, 36, of Summerville, Georgia, was sentenced to 9 years, 9 months in federal prison.

All of those prison terms will be followed by 3 years of supervised release.

This case was investigated by the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation and IRS-Criminal Investigation. Substantial assistance was provided by the Lookout Mountain Judicial Circuit Drug Task Force, the Chattooga County Sheriff's Office, and the Murray County Sheriff's Office.

Assistant United States Attorneys Todd Alley and Scott Hulsey 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](http://www.usdoj.gov/usao/gan).