



*Office of the United States Attorney
District of Arizona*

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CULTIVATING MARIJUANA IN THE TONTO NATIONAL FOREST NETS DEFENDANT 10 YEARS IN FEDERAL PRISON

PHOENIX – Jose Tapia Varelas, 23, of Coalcoman, Michoacan, Mexico, was sentenced here yesterday to 10 years in federal prison by U.S. District Judge Earl H. Carroll. Varelas pleaded guilty on April 15, 2008, to the charge of Conspiracy to Cultivate More Than 1,000 Marijuana Plants on National Forest Lands.

An investigation into Varelas' activities which began in August of 2006 and ended in October of 2007, led to the discovery of two marijuana cultivation areas near Gold Creek Canyon and Hinton Canyon in the Tonto National Forest within Gila County, Ariz. These cultivation areas were located in remote canyon areas of the forest more than 200 yards from forest service roads. Varelas was observed traveling between the cultivation areas and Phoenix, delivering food and cultivation supplies to workers who stayed in the remote grow sites for months at a time. He was also observed transporting harvested marijuana out of the forest. Law enforcement officers eradicated over 7,000 marijuana plants from the two cultivation areas. Varelas' sentence was enhanced because he possessed a firearm in connection with the cultivation conspiracy.

The investigation in this case was conducted by the U.S. Forest Service, Phoenix Police Department and the Gila County Narcotics Task Force, with the assistance of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. The prosecution was handled by Glenn McCormick, Assistant U.S. Attorney, District of Arizona, Phoenix.

CASE NUMBER: CR-07-1136-PHX-EHC
RELEASE NUMBER: 2008-204(Varelas)

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