



PRESS RELEASE

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**FEDERAL INVESTIGATION DISMANTLES LAS CRUCES-BASED
METHAMPHETAMINE TRAFFICKING RING**

***Drug Trafficking Organization Allegedly Smuggled Methamphetamine from
Phoenix, Ariz., and El Paso, Texas, to Doña Ana County***

LAS CRUCES – Late yesterday afternoon, the U.S. District Court unsealed a 16-count indictment charging ten alleged members of a methamphetamine trafficking organization that distributed quantities of methamphetamine in Las Cruces, N.M. The indictment was announced by U.S. Attorney Kenneth J. Gonzales, Joseph M. Arabit, Special Agent in Charge of the DEA's El Paso Division, and Thomas G. Atteberry, Special Agent in Charge of the ATF's Phoenix Division.

The indictment, which was filed under seal on May 16, 2012, was unsealed following yesterday's multi-agency arrest operation which resulted in the arrest of the following individuals who are charged in the indictment: Las Cruces residents Scott Spencer Wetherholt, 42, Patricia Kronberger, 44, Ernest Joe Marquez, 43, Velinda Galvan, 49, Wayland Duane Leeth, 41, Erik Armando Nahle, 27, Joshua Lee Whitley, 30, and David Lawrence Garza, 45. Another defendant, Patricia Lopez-Rodriguez, 40, of Glendale, Ariz., was arrested this afternoon as she traveled from Arizona towards Las Cruces. The remaining defendant, Leticia Ramirez, 35, of Las Cruces, has yet to be apprehended and is considered a fugitive.

The eight defendants who were arrested yesterday made their initial appearances in federal court in Las Cruces this morning. All eight are temporarily detained pending their arraignments and detention hearings on May 29, 2012. Lopez-Rodriguez's initial appearance has yet to be scheduled.

The indictment alleges that all ten defendants participated in a conspiracy to possess methamphetamine with the intent to distribute methamphetamine from Jan. 2012 through May 2012. Members of the conspiracy allegedly smuggled methamphetamine from El Paso, Texas, and Phoenix, Ariz. to Doña Ana, County, N.M. If convicted on the conspiracy charge, each defendant faces a minimum of ten years to a maximum of life imprisonment and a \$10 million fine.

In addition to the conspiracy charge, Wetherholt, Kronberger and Leeth are charged with possessing 289.6 grams of pure methamphetamine with intent to distribute in March 2012. If convicted of this offense, each faces a minimum of ten years to a maximum of life imprisonment and a \$10 million fine. In addition, Wetherholt and Leeth are charged with being felons in possession of firearms, which exposes them to a maximum of ten years of imprisonment and a \$250,000 fine upon conviction.

Ramirez is charged with distributing methamphetamine on two occasions in April 2012, and faces up to twenty years of imprisonment and a \$1 million dollar fine if convicted of either of these distribution offenses. Galvan and Marquez are charged with possessing approximately 453.6 grams of methamphetamine with intent to distribute in April 2012. Each faces a minimum of five years and a maximum of forty years of imprisonment and a \$5 million fine if convicted of this offense. All ten defendants are charged with using communication devices (telephones) to facilitate drug trafficking crimes, which carry a maximum four year term of imprisonment on conviction.

Two other defendants, Melchor Arroyos-Serna, 51, of El Paso, Texas, and Christopher Apalategui, 43, of Las Cruces, are charged in criminal complaints as a result of the investigation. Both currently are in state custody, and will be transferred to federal custody to face the federal charges. Arroyos-Serna is charged with possessing approximately 544 grams of methamphetamine with the intent to distribute on May 14, 2012. He faces a minimum of ten years and a maximum of life imprisonment and a \$10 million fine if convicted. Apalategui is charged with being a felon who unlawfully possessed a firearm on April 8, 2012 in Doña Ana County. He faces up to ten years of imprisonment and a \$250,000 fine, if convicted.

The indictment and complaints are the result of a five-month investigation led by the DEA and ATF, which was designated as part of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (“OCDETF”) program. OCDETF is a nationwide Department of Justice program that combines the resources and unique expertise of federal agencies, along with their local counterparts, in a coordinated effort to disrupt and dismantle major drug trafficking organizations.

During the course of the investigation, federal agents seized approximately 850 grams of methamphetamine, with a wholesale value of approximately \$22,000 and a retail value of approximately \$85,000 or more. They also seized 13 firearms. During the course of yesterday’s arrest operation, law enforcement officers executed court authorized search warrants at residences in Las Cruces. The officers seized approximately 170 grams of methamphetamine, drug paraphernalia and six firearms when they executed the search warrants.

This case was investigated by the DEA and ATF, with assistance from the U.S. Border Patrol, the Hatch Police Department, the Narcotics - Motor Transportation Division of the New Mexico Department of Public Safety, the New Mexico State Police, Las Cruces/Doña Ana

County Metro Narcotics Agency, and the Las Cruces Police Department Gang Task Force. It is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Sarah M. Davenport and Marisa Lizarraga.

Indictments and complaints are only charges and not evidence of guilt. A defendant is presumed innocent and is entitled to a fair trial at which the government must prove guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

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