



PRESS RELEASE

Colorado Department of Law
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ATTORNEY GENERAL, DEA, AND DENVER POLICE DEPARTMENT JOIN FORCES TO HALT MAJOR METHAMPHETAMINE TRAFFICKING NETWORK

Investigation Reveals Sophisticated Methods of Trafficking Liquid Meth into Denver-Metro Area

DENVER—Colorado Attorney General John Suthers, Barbra M. Roach, the Special Agent-in-Charge of the Denver Division of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and Chief Robert White of the Denver Police Department today announced 15 individuals were indicted by the statewide Grand Jury for trafficking methamphetamine (meth) and cocaine from Mexico to Colorado. They are being charged under the Colorado Organized Crime Control Act (COCCA) for a pattern of racketeering and conspiring to distribute meth and cocaine.

“Investigators have uncovered and interrupted an international drug-smuggling ring that trafficked meth from Mexico through the ports of entry in El Paso, Texas and San Diego, California,” said Roach. “In total we have seized 35.5 pounds of meth valued between \$300,000 and \$500,000 and 3.5 kilos of cocaine with a street value of approximately \$100,000.”

“What is unique about this case is how the meth was being trafficked from Mexico into Colorado,” said Suthers. “Couriers from the United States carried liquid meth in factory-sealed drink bottles and walked them across the border or drove the liquid meth into Colorado by storing it in the windshield washer reservoirs of SUVs. This is new for Colorado.”

“Known as ‘Thirst Quencher’ this interagency operation led to the arrest of 11 individuals and took a sizeable quantity of meth and cocaine off our streets,” said White. “Denver Police was the lead agency on the arrests and partnered with state and federal law enforcement agencies to dismantle this ring without officer incident.”

Josue Castenada (D.O.B. 06/18/86), Joshua Cooke (D.O.B. 05/04/93), Rodolzo Lewis (D.O.B. 05/22/75), Mario Munoz (D.O.B. 05/11/84), Mark Nolf (D.O.B. 05/03/61), Gustavo Ramirez (D.O.B. 05/23/63), Jesus Patricia Salas-Lucero (D.O.B. 02/15/80), Harland Schug (D.O.B. 05/05/52), Ana Rosa Vargas-Hernandez (D.O.B. 10/25/87), Jose Antonio Vargas-Gonzalez (D.O.B. 08/30/88), and Jose Manual Cantano-Acosta (D.O.B. 05/19/68) are currently being held in the Denver Jail and each face two counts under COCCA for racketeering and additional drug trafficking charges. Under COCCA, if convicted, each could be sentenced up to 24-years per count.

Beginning in September 2012, this group began trafficking liquid meth in factory-sealed water bottles into Colorado. The group used U.S. citizens as couriers to walk the bottles of meth across the El Paso, TX Port of Entry into the United States on a weekly basis. Once the liquid meth was transported into Colorado, it was processed into crystal meth by the locally-based members of the enterprise who then supplied their respective dealers and end-user customers with the drugs.

In February 2013, a bottle containing 1.5 liters of liquid meth was confiscated in a factory-sealed flavored-water bottle destined for Denver.

In May 2013, six liters of liquid meth hidden in the windshield wiper fluid reservoir of a SUV was seized en route to Denver from Tijuana, Baja California Norte, Mexico. Also in May, agents found ten pounds of crystal methamphetamine derived from the emptied flavored water bottles and 1.5 kilograms of cocaine along with four guns and \$80,000 from a bank account used to launder drug proceeds in a Denver-area apartment. This apartment had been utilized by the group for more than six months to process the liquid meth into a crystalized form of meth after it arrived in Denver.

On July 2, 2013, a raid on a Denver-area apartment led to five pounds of liquid meth and 1.5 pounds of crystal meth, \$17,700 and a gun being seized. Agents also recovered another windshield washer fluid reservoir used to transport the liquid meth and materials for processing liquid meth from the apartment.

On August 3, 2013, two kilograms of cocaine were recovered en route to Denver from Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua Mexico. The cocaine was hidden in the oil pan of a Jeep Wrangler.

Then on August 10, 2013, 11 liters of liquid meth were recovered from the windshield washer fluid reservoir of a GMC Yukon en route to Denver from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico.

The Attorney General's Special Prosecutions Unit will prosecute the indicted individuals in Denver District Court. The indictment and arrests announced today were the culmination of a seven-month, joint investigation conducted by the Drug Enforcement Administration Denver Field Division Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) Strike Force and Denver Police Department. The mission of the OCDETF Strike Force is to dismantle, and prosecute the command and control structure of major international and interstate drug transportation and smuggling organizations operating in and through the Mountain West region of the United States through collaborative criminal and financial investigations.

This investigation is ongoing and agencies are working with domestic and international law enforcement agencies to extradite additional individuals. The charges contained in the indictment are merely accusations, and the defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proved guilty.

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