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JURY TRIAL CANCELLED AS THE LAST OF 39 DEFENDANTS PLEAD GUILTY IN INVESTIGATIONS OF THE NUESTRA FAMILIA DRUG TRAFFICKING ORGANIZATION

FRESNO, Calif. — The last five pending defendants in a series of huge cases targeting the Nuestra Familia organization pleaded guilty in U.S. District Court this week, U.S. Attorney Benjamin B. Wagner announced. Calixtro Israel Sanchez, aka Cali Killa, aka Cali, 26, of Hanford, pleaded guilty today to a drug trafficking offense. Jose Velez, aka Cisco, 31, of Delano; Felipe Ramirez, aka Casper, 33, of Visalia; Christopher Medrano, aka Bob, 32, of Hanford; and Florentino Acosta, of Mexico, all pleaded guilty earlier this week to drug trafficking offenses.

These five defendants are the last of 39 defendants to plead guilty to federal offenses in these coordinated cases. A jury trial that had been scheduled for March 11, 2014, has been vacated. All defendants were members or associates of the Nuestra Familia (NF). NF is a violent Hispanic prison gang based within the California prison system whose members exert control over street-level Norteño gang members engaged in drug trafficking and violent crime throughout the Central Valley.

According to court documents, during 2009 and 2010, the NF trafficked in methamphetamine, distributing the drugs and collecting debts in Kings, Tulare, Kern, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera and Fresno Counties. The NF obtained large shipments of methamphetamine from Mexico and distributed it among NF regiments throughout California and elsewhere. Some of the profits of the trafficking funded NF members in prison in order to maintain the NF's power structure within the prison system.

"Numerous federal, state and local law enforcement agencies in this region came together to take on one of the most dangerous gangs in California," said U.S. Attorney Wagner. "That battle will continue, but the guilty pleas taken this week are a major step forward in protecting the communities of the Central Valley from the violent drug traffickers of the Nuestra Familia."

"Organized prison gangs and other criminals who traffic drugs are responsible for increased violence in our communities," stated Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Special Agent in Charge Joseph M. Riehl. "This investigation is a prime example of teamwork and superior collaboration among many law enforcement agencies with a successful investigative conclusion and prosecution."

Twenty-six of the defendants who have pleaded guilty have already been sentenced to prison. Nine of them received sentences of between 10 and 16 years in prison, while the remaining 17 have received sentences of between four and 10 years in prison. Parole has been abolished in the federal system, and all defendants will be required to serve at least 85 percent of the prison time imposed.

This case is the product of an extensive series of investigations by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives; the FBI; the DEA; Kings County Narcotic Task Force; the California Department of Justice; and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. Numerous local law enforcement agencies played key roles in the investigations, including the Police Departments of Hanford, Lemoore, Visalia, Los Banos, and Corcoran, the Kings County Sheriff's Office, the California Highway Patrol, and the U.S. Marshals Service. Assistant United States Attorneys Kimberly A. Sanchez, Kathleen A. Servatius, and Melanie L. Alsworth are prosecuting the cases.

Calixtro Sanchez is scheduled to be sentenced by Judge O'Neill on April 21, 2014. Jose Velez is scheduled to be sentenced by Judge O'Neill on April 28, 2014. Felipe Ramirez, Christopher Medrano, and Florentino Acosta are scheduled to be sentenced by Judge O'Neill on April 21, 2014. The defendants face a maximum statutory penalty of life in prison and a mandatory minimum of 10 years in prison and a \$4 million fine. The actual sentences, however, will be determined at the discretion of the court after consideration of any applicable statutory factors and the Federal Sentencing Guidelines, which take into account a number of variables.

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