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Drug Busts & Seizures

Meth ring targeted reservations

By BRODIE FARQUHAR
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LANDER -- A ruthlessly planned and executed business plan developed by a Mexican drug ring targeted Indian reservations in the West for methamphetamine distribution.

Leaders of that drug gang are in prison or on the run, say law enforcement officials, who broke up a meth distribution ring based in Ogden, Utah. The gang's tentacles reached deep into the Wind River Indian Reservation and surrounding Fremont County communities in Wyoming.

Last month, Jesus Martin Sagaste-Cruz was convicted of distribution of methamphetamine and conspiracy, and sentenced to life in federal prison.

Authorities said he executed a business plan to sell meth not only in Fremont County, but also the Rosebud, Pine Ridge and Yankton reservations in South Dakota and the Santee Sioux Reservation in Nebraska.

Authorities estimate he directed the sale of 98 pounds of meth in and around the Wind River reservation. Cruz apparently believed he could exploit jurisdictional loopholes and barriers by focusing on the reservations, authorities said.

Assistant Wyoming U.S. Attorney Robert Murray, an enrolled member of the Eastern Shoshone Tribe, helped prosecute and break up the drug gang's distribution ring. Murray said he was amazed and disturbed when he learned of the business plan used by the drug ring gangsters.

"It actually started with a news article they read in the Denver Post a few years ago," Murray said. The article described how liquor stores in the tiny town of Whiteclay, Neb., were profitably selling huge quantities of alcohol to American Indians from the nearby Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota.

Gleaned from several sources in the investigation, the following picture emerged, Murray said. The drug gang business plan was based on the following information:

- * The Whiteclay liquor stores sold \$4 million a year in beer and malt liquor primarily to residents of the nearby Pine Ridge reservation -- 18,000 Oglala Lakota Sioux.
- * The reservation had an alcoholism problem of epidemic proportions.
- * Liquor sales peaked each month shortly after monthly per-capita checks were sent in the mail.
- * Gang members reasoned that if people who were addicted to alcohol could be given free samples of meth, the addicts would quickly switch over to being addicted to meth.
- * The Mexican-national gang members figured they wouldn't stand out among American Indians.

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According to Murray, the plan identified a potential consumer base (Indians living on reservations or nearby); successful businesses that already preyed on addicts (the liquor stores); a regular source of income their customers could use to buy meth (the monthly checks); and the conviction that alcohol consumers could be switched over to being meth consumers (free samples of meth).

"It was all there," Murray said, referring to the elements of a classic business plan. The gang led by Cruz and his brother, Julio Cesar Sagaste-Cruz could distribute the meth via customers who would be forced to become dealers to support their own habits. The meth could be supplied by "super labs" in California and Mexico, controlled by the Sinaloa Cowboys gang.

Law enforcement officials traced the connections from the Sinaloa Cowboys (headquartered in Sinaloa, Mexico) to the Los Angeles-based 18th Street Gang, to the Cruz brothers' cell in Ogden.

"They realized that if they could convert the addiction from alcohol to meth, they could reap the profits," Murray said.

Executing the plan

To execute the business plan, members of the Cruz cell moved into nearby communities of the above reservations, Murray said. The first thing the Mexican-national gang members did was to develop romantic relationships with Indian women.

"Some of them even had children with these Indian women," Murray said.

The women were introduced to meth with free samples, he said. "All of the low-level distributors said they started as recreational users," and all became severely addicted to meth.

To support their new and expensive habits, meth customers became dealers and distributors themselves, using free samples to recruit customers, Murray said. From there, it was steady growth as customers became dealers/recruiters themselves, and their customers became dealers/recruiters in a deadly pyramid growth scheme.

The growth of the customer base was equal opportunity, with meth sold to Indians and non-Indians alike.

Brian Eggleston, a Wyoming Division of Criminal Investigation agent, said the key to breaking the Cruz ring was communication with local law enforcement offices, on and off the reservations. Sharing information and resources allowed for a gradual realization that they were dealing with a large-scale criminal enterprise -- much bigger than a few meth heads hanging around a reservation.

Doug Noseep, chief of police for the Bureau of Indian Affairs' Wind River Agency, agreed that shared communications and resources were crucial.

Noseep, an enrolled member of the Eastern Shoshone, is a federal police officer, a graduate of the federal law enforcement training center. When he was working for the BIA in Albuquerque, N.M., he began to hear rumblings about a Mexican-national gang targeting reservations.

"When I came back to the Wind River reservation as the police chief in July 2003, I started hearing about four or five Mexicans living over in Arapahoe with some Indian females," Noseep said. "I kept hearing they were selling a lot of drugs."

A January 2004 drug bust in Ethete convinced Noseep that he needed help.

During that bust, with close to a dozen agents inside the drug house, customers kept coming up to buy drugs.

As drug investigations progressed on the reservation, Noseep said the same group of Mexican nationals and their women kept cropping up.

"They were tied into everyone we knew," he said.

DCI "opened doors" for the Wind River police, Noseep said, providing a vehicle that could be used for undercover operations, a computer and a slot on the DCI Northwest Enforcement Team for one of Noseep's patrol officers.

Tightening the noose

As meth customers and dealers fell afoul of various law enforcement agencies, Eggleston and his partners in other law enforcement agencies were able to "turn" various meth addicts into informers or cooperators. A complex web of drug, business and romantic relationships

emerged, not only on the Wind River reservation and throughout Fremont County, but in and around the other reservations as well.

Here in Fremont County, a total of 17 men and women were swept up in investigation in the communities of Riverton, Lander, Pavillion, Kinnear and on the Wind River Indian Reservation.

The noose tightened, and while authorities were able to catch, convict and sentence one Cruz brother to life in prison, the other, Julio, is still at large.

"This is an ongoing investigation," Murray said.

"The gangs thought they were safe on reservations," believing that reservation police departments were nothing to worry about, Noseep said.

They were wrong, largely because of the new partnerships that have emerged among reservation, county, state and federal law enforcement agencies.

"What I want people to know," Noseep said, "is that if they see something, they should report it and something can be done." He cautioned that it takes time -- months and even years -- to put together a solid case that stands up in court. The Cruz investigation dates back to 1999.

"It can be frustrating, because when you see something, you want them busted right then and there. It takes patience," Noseep said.

Murray said he's been told by some of the meth addicts who cooperated with the investigation that getting arrested probably saved their lives. All are in prison, he said, and participate in what may just be the best treatment program in the country -- 500 hours of a high-intensity residential program developed by the Bureau of Prisons.

"Ultimately, our goal is to reach beyond Wyoming and work up the food chain to the super labs in California and Mexico," Noseep said.

'A business, pure and simple'

In sentencing Jesus Martin Sagaste-Cruz to life in prison July 6, U.S. District Judge Alan B. Johnson said the following:

"(This sentence) sends a strong message out to the public of the court's abhorrence of the poison of methamphetamine that is and has been, under this conspiracy, distributed in Wyoming and elsewhere and, more particularly, targeting Fremont County, Wyoming, and the problem-plagued society on the Wind River Indian Reservation...

"The sentence imposed certainly does express the government's strong desire to inform the public and this defendant as to the danger and injuries that are caused by methamphetamine. It is a sad thing, certainly a sad commentary upon America, that there is such an appetite for this controlled substance so as to stimulate and offer incentives to men like Martin Sagaste-Cruz to violate the laws of the United States as a business. And that's what this was, a business, pure and simple, to distribute large quantities of methamphetamine.

"Standing before me today is not a man who is addicted to drugs or is dealing with his own personal depression or demons in his life. He is a man who is part of a business organization which exists for the purpose of bringing his poison into the United States, over the borders, from California to Utah and onto Wyoming, for consumption by those people on the reservation and others throughout the state of Wyoming who do suffer from a wide variety of ills as well as disorders in their own lives that feed upon this appetite or a part of this appetite for methamphetamine."

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