

PV drug dealers plead guilty in federal court

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The key figures in a huge Pajaro Valley drug ring have pled guilty in federal court and are facing sentences of at least 10 years.

The pleas were entered by members of a drug ring headed by Jose Torres Alvarez, 32, of Las Lomas, which authorities estimated was selling up to \$2.8 million worth of drugs a month.

The ring was broken in June 1990 when federal, state and local authorities simultaneously raided 24 homes, most of them in Watsonville, Pajaro and Las Lomas, and arrested 46 people.

Drug agents had been investigating the ring for nearly two years and had made numerous drug buys from members of the loosely knit ring, which distributed drugs throughout Central California.

U.S. Attorney Matthew Pavone said he was not surprised by the guilty pleas.

"We had a really strong case," he said, because investigators had obtained wiretap authority and were able to trace the drug transactions.

"We got them all, from the lowest runner to the top," said Ron Brooks, commander of the Santa Cruz County Narcotics Team, one of about a dozen agencies that worked on the case.

Also pleading guilty to various drug-possession and sale charges were Miguel Torres Alvarez, 32, half-brother of Jose Alvarez; David Cuevas, 21, brother-in-law to Jose Alvarez; Cristina Nolasco, 35; and Rogelio Mota, 40.

Most of the other people arrested have already pled guilty to lesser state and local charges.

The only key player in the ring still at large is Marcelino Barajas, 32, husband of Cristina Nolasco. Barajas, named as the No. 3 man in the ring behind the Alvarez

brothers, is thought to be in Mexico.

Defendants were prosecuted in federal court because of stronger sentencing laws there. Unlike state prisons, where inmates get their sentences reduced by half for good behavior, federal prisoners serve virtually the entire sentence. No date has been set for sentencing.

The investigation involved "good police work, but also a lot of luck," Brooks said. When they first learned of the Alvarez ring through an informant, investigators didn't realize how big it was.

The key to the case came when two undercover officers from Monterey County, who had been buying drugs from Jose Alvarez, had dinner with him in March 1989. Over dinner, Alvarez told the agents he had already saved enough money to never work again and had bought two small cattle ranches and three houses in Michoacan state.

Alvarez did not use drugs, investigators said.

Investigators continued buying drugs and tracing members of the ring, almost all of whom had come from Mexico. Some members held jobs in the Pajaro Valley; most of them lived in simple or even run-down homes.

When the raids went down last year, authorities seized 35 pounds of cocaine, \$350,000 cash, 24 guns and other drug paraphernalia.

The law allows fines along with the sentences, but prosecutor Pavone said it's unlikely the defendants have any U.S. assets that have not already been seized.

Alvarez's property in Mexico can't be seized, Pavone said.

The Alvarez raid forced local drug prices up and decreased availability for some time, Brooks said. Other drug dealers, he said, became more cautious.