

3 held as drug kingpins

By **DAN WHITE**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — Federal agents say they've nabbed three key figures in an expansive Central Coast drug ring that was dealing large amounts of heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine.

Watsonville police helped the FBI build its case against the local men, who were arrested Monday and charged with trying to distribute more than 500 grams of methamphetamine. The indictments were handed down by a federal grand jury. Officers were not on the scene during the arrests, but said "Operation Monterey Express" targeted an operation that spanned Watsonville, Modesto, San Jose and Mexico. The investigation took more than two years.

The drug ring was one of the largest in the area, police said, adding that a large volume of the drugs stayed in the region.

"It is anticipated that the flow of heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine will be severely restricted in the Monterey Bay due to these arrests," Watsonville police said in a prepared statement.

The FBI referred all calls on the arrests to the U.S. Justice Department. Officials there could not be reached to comment.

Two of the suspects, Pedro Magana-Pantoja, 37, and Esteban Moreno-Gomez Jr., 27, are Watsonville residents. Also arrested was Jose Armando Escobedo Reyes, 37, of Seaside. All three face federal drugs and weapons charges.

Magana-Pantoja and Moreno-Gomez Jr. are familiar to Watsonville police.

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Bust

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Moreno-Gomez Jr. faces an October hearing in connection with the stabbing death of a Watsonville man, according to county court records. He was arrested on suspicion of murder, along with 18-year-old Fabian Saucedo, in July of 2001 in connection with the stabbing death of a man outside the Veterans Memorial Building in Watsonville, where a girl was celebrating her 15th birthday. He was out on bail when he was arrested Monday.

He was scheduled to be in Santa Cruz Superior Court on Oct. 24 in connection with the case, records show.

Magana-Pantoja was arrested locally in 1997, along with his brother, on charges of conspiracy to possess heroin and methamphetamine for sale. A federal grand jury now charges that Magana-Pantoja recently distributed more than 500 grams of cocaine.

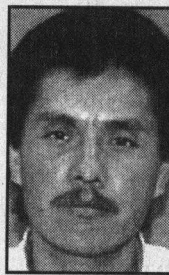
Watsonville Police Capt. Manny Solano said the suspects were arrested "while driving away from their homes, in different locations." He said they were part of a group that had been moving "literally hundreds of kilos of

cocaine and heroin," and that the arrests broke up a large part of the network.

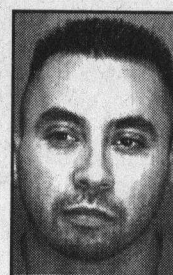
"It's not uncommon for San Jose agencies and the FBI to uncover something like this in a huge metro area," he said. "It's unusual for an area of our size. Over the years it's become common knowledge that the (Monterey) Bay area is somewhat of a hub, a stop-off on (drug) transportation routes coming up from the Mexican border."

The charges involve more than narcotics sales.

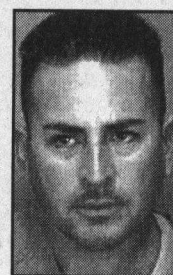
According to the U.S. Justice Department, Moreno-Gomez Jr. tried to elude the IRS by illegally "structuring" \$15,000 in cash deposits and \$14,800 in cash withdrawals at Wells Fargo Bank in Watsonville during May 2001. The grand jury also alleged that Reyes illegally "transferred" a machine gun last year, and that Magana-Pantoja illegally re-entered the United States in



MAGANA-PANTOJA



REYES



MORENO-GOMEZ

the spring of last year after deportation.

Moreno-Gomez Jr. appeared in federal court in San Jose on Monday morning, and is being held without bail. He faces a hearing on Thursday. Magana-Pantoja and Reyes were expected to appear in federal court Monday afternoon.

The Santa Cruz County Narcotic Enforcement Team, Internal Revenue Service, U.S. Customs Service and the Drug Enforcement Agency participated in the investigation.

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