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EASTERN DISTRICT *of* NORTH CAROLINA

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Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

Eastern District of North Carolina

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Twenty-One Individuals Indicted on Charges of Conspiracy to Commit Interstate Transportation of Stolen Used Cooking Oil, Money Laundering, Harboring Aliens, and Immigration-Related Entrepreneurship Fraud

RALEIGH – Robert J. Higdon Jr., United States Attorney for the Eastern District of North Carolina, announces that a federal grand jury in Raleigh has returned a Superseding Indictment charging the following individuals with conspiracy to commit interstate transportation of stolen goods and money laundering:

- **SALVADOR IBARRA ESCALANTE**, age 43, of Mexico, also known as “Billy Escalante”
- **RUTH NAVA-ABARCA**, age 29, of Mexico
- **FLORENTINO VALENCIA-TEPOZ**, age 47 of Mexico
- **GREGORIO VAZQUEZ-CASTILLO**, age 43, of Mexico, also known as “Jaime Castillo”
- **JUAN DE LA CRUZ-GONZALEZ**, age 32, of Mexico
- **SAMUEL CRUZ**, age 42, of Durham, North Carolina
- **MIGUEL GUTIERREZ**, age 24, of Henderson, North Carolina
- **JAIME LABRA-TOVAR**, age 23, of Henderson, North Carolina
- **OSCAR UGALDE-ESCALANTE**, age 31, of Mexico
- **HASAN OZVATAN**, age 40, of Turkey
- **EMILIO GOMEZ-GONZALEZ**, age 36, of Mexico
- **JUAN MALDONADO-HERNANDEZ**, age 28, of Mexico
- **GEORGE LUIS MORALES**, age 21, of New York, New York
- **TORIBIO ESCALANTE-CAMPOS**, age 59, of Mexico
- **ERIC EVO**, age 24, of Richmond, Virginia
- **RYAN MERCADO-RODRIGUEZ**, age 24, of Henderson, North Carolina
- **JUAN LOPEZ-POSADA**, age 40, of El Salvador
- **RENE ESPINOZA-TORRES**, age 45, of Mexico
- **KELVIN FE ARELLANO-VALENCIA**, age 19, of Raleigh, North Carolina
- **DEMETRIO VALENCIA-FLORES**, age 42, of Mexico
- **ALVARO MENDEZ-FLORES**, age 38, of Mexico.

Moreover, **GOMEZ-GONZALEZ** was charged with failure to register with immigration officials. In addition, **NAVA-ABARCA**, **VALENCIA-TEPOZ**, **ESCALANTE-CAMPOS**, **IBARRA-ESCALANTE**, and **VAZQUEZ-CASTILLO** were charged with alien harboring. Furthermore, **IBARRA-ESCALANTE**, **VALENCIA-TEPOZ**, **NAVA-ABARCA**, and **VAZQUEZ-CASTILLO** were charged with immigration-related entrepreneurship fraud.

According to the Superseding Indictment, used cooking oil, historically viewed as a waste product, has become a valuable recycled commodity over the past decade. The majority of the recycled cooking oil sold is used for biofuel, fluctuating with market demand. It can also be used as a nutritional additive to animal feed and pet food, or in the production of many consumer and industrial products.

Legitimate businesses, known renderers, collect used cooking oil from restaurants in exchange of compensation and sell it to refineries so that it can be processed and recycled. The rendering industry estimates that there is an annual loss of approximately \$45-75 million dollars from the theft of used cooking oil.

According to court records, the objective of the conspiracy was to profit from the illicit trade in large quantities of used cooking oil stolen in North Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee, and transported to New Jersey for sale and distribution.

In particular, the Superseding Indictment alleges that members of the conspiracy repeatedly traveled to restaurants in North Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee, in box trucks equipped with containers designed to store and transport liquids, pumps, hoses, and burglary tools, for the purpose of stealing large quantities of used cooking oil.

Additionally, members of the conspiracy transported the stolen used cooking oil in the box trucks to a warehouse in Durham, North Carolina, for consolidation and storage. Thereafter, a tanker trailer was used to transport the consolidated stolen used cooking oil to Virginia and elsewhere.

“Used cooking oil has become a sought-after commodity by biodiesel companies, and restaurants use the sale of this oil as another source of revenue,” said John Eisert, Acting Special Agent in Charge of Homeland Security Investigations in Charlotte, North Carolina. “This team of co-conspirators had an elaborate scheme to steal thousands of gallons of cooking oil for their own profit in violation of several U.S. laws.”

If convicted of conspiracy to commit interstate transportation of stolen goods and money laundering, **IBARRA ESCALANTE**, **NAVA-ABARCA**, **VALENCIA-TEPOZ**, **VAZQUEZ-CASTILLO**, **DE LA CRUZ-GONZALEZ**, **CRUZ**, **GUTIERREZ**, **LABRA-TOVAR**, **UGALDE-ESCALANTE**, **OZVATAN**, **GOMEZ-GONZALEZ**, **MALDONADO-HERNANDEZ**, **MORALES**, **ESCALANTE-CAMPOS**, **EVO**, **MERCADO-RODRIGUEZ**, **LOPEZ-POSADA**, **ESPINOZA-TORRES**, **ARELLANO-VALENCIA**, **VALENCIA-FLORES**, and **MENDEZ-FLORES**, face each a maximum of twenty five years in prison, a \$500,000 fine, and a term of supervised release.

Furthermore, **GOMEZ-GONZALEZ** faces an additional maximum term of six months in prison for failing to register as an alien, and a \$1,000 fine. In addition, **NAVA-ABARCA**, **VALENCIA-TEPOZ**, **ESCALANTE-CAMPOS**, **IBARRA-ESCALANTE**, and **VAZQUEZ-CASTILLO** each face an additional maximum of five years in prison for alien harboring, a \$250,000 fine, and a term of supervised release. Moreover, **IBARRA-ESCALANTE**, **VALENCIA-TEPOZ**, **NAVA-ABARCA**, and **VAZQUEZ-CASTILLO** each face an additional maximum of five years in prison for immigration-related entrepreneurship fraud, a \$250,000 fine, and a term of supervised release.

The following defendants are currently fugitives from justice:

- **JUAN DE LA CRUZ-GONZALEZ**
- **RENE ESPINOZA-TORRES**
- **EMILIO GOMEZ-GONZALEZ**
- **JUAN MALDONADO-HERNANDEZ**
- **RUTH NAVA-ABARCA**
- **HASAN OZVATAN**

If you have any information on the whereabouts of these individuals please contact the Homeland Security Investigations Tip-Line at 1-866-DHS-2-ICE or 1-866-347-2423. Any information that you provide will remain confidential.

The charges and allegations contained in the Superseding Indictment are merely accusations. The defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty in a court of law. This case is being investigated by Homeland Security Investigations.

Topic(s):

Immigration

Component(s):

[USAO - North Carolina, Eastern](#)

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