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GRANTS OUTFITTER SENTENCED TO 10 YEARS IN JAIL IN ILLEGAL HUNTING SCHEME

GRANTS - An outfitter who admitted to cheating hunters, forging licenses and evading state taxes was sentenced to 10 years in jail Friday in one of New Mexico's biggest cases of poaching and wildlife-related fraud.

Thirteenth Judicial District Court Judge Camille Olguin also sentenced Adrian Romero, 35, to five years probation following his jail term, and ordered him to pay almost \$200,000 in restitution to 28 hunters whom he and his wife, Henrietta Romero, swindled in their illegal hunting and outfitting operation from 2002 to 2004. The Romeros pleaded guilty in October 2006 to a combined 10 felony charges, including racketeering, forgery, tax evasion and embezzlement. Henrietta Romero, 33, was sentenced Oct. 30 to five years probation as part of a plea agreement.

"It is important that we prosecute these types of cases vigorously - to send a strong message that New Mexico will not tolerate this type of illegal activity," District Attorney Lemuel Martinez said. "We place high values on our trophy wildlife, and we must protect it along with the integrity of legitimate hunters and guides."

The Romeros, of Grants, were indicted in January 2006 on 66 felony charges related to the operation of their business, Non-Typical Outfitters. They were accused of forging hunting licenses and hunters' signatures, arranging and conducting illegal hunts, and failing to report state gross receipts amounting to \$244,000, on which substantial state taxes were evaded. Their plea agreements require them to pay thousands of dollars in restitution to all fraud victims listed in the indictments, and to reimburse the state for all back taxes. Henrietta Romero also agreed to never again act as a hunting guide, outfitter or landowner agent, and to give up her hunting and fishing privileges for 15 years in New

Mexico and the other 23 states that are members of the Interstate Wildlife Violator Compact.

The indictments were the result of a 1 ½-year investigation by the Department of Game and Fish and the New Mexico Taxation and Revenue Department.

"Illegal hunting is becoming more of a commercial, high-dollar activity - and those activities are often accompanied by tax evasion," said Alvan Romero, director of the Taxation and Revenue Department's Tax Fraud Investigations Division. "I see our division becoming more and more involved in these types of investigations."

Adrian Romero's sentence is one of the harshest ever handed down in New Mexico for wildlife-related crimes. The case was the second in the past year in which New Mexico wildlife crimes resulted in significant jail time. In Oct. 2006, a former Catron County outfitter was sentenced to serve nine years in jail in connection with an illegal hunting operation. Rita Floyd, 54, pleaded guilty to racketeering, fraud over \$2,500, and two misdemeanor counts of outfitting without a license. She originally was charged with 101 counts, including 60 felonies, for her role in an illegal scheme to forge licenses and sell hunts to out-of-state hunters.

Alfredo Montoya, Chairman of the New Mexico Game Commission, said harsh sentences and significant civil penalties are needed to deter people seeking to profit by stealing New Mexico's wildlife. The state Legislature, Gov. Bill Richardson and the Commission recently approved civil penalties up to \$10,000 for poachers convicted of taking "trophy" wildlife.

"Maybe jail time and heavy fines will get the message across to people who are essentially stealing some of our most prized resources," Montoya said. "Our trophy wildlife means a lot to our legitimate hunters and outfitters, and it has a significant impact on our rural economies. These recent court cases illustrate the Department's commitment to stop the poaching and protect our resources."

Recent studies indicate that hunting and other wildlife-associated recreation bring nearly \$1 billion to New Mexico's economy, including \$127 million from outfitting and guiding businesses.

The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish encourages citizens to join the anti-poaching fight by using the Department's toll-free Operation Game Thief hotline, (800) 432- GAME (4263), or visiting the Department Web site, www.wildlife.state.nm.us. Reporters can remain anonymous and receive rewards if charges are filed. To report tax fraud, please call the New Mexico Tax Fraud Hotline, (866) 457-6789.

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