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**MERCED SHERIFF'S INVESTIGATION LEADS TO ARREST IN  
11 YEAR OLD HOMICIDE**

An inmate at Salinas Valley State Prison was charged Monday with an April, 1998 murder which took place at the Merced National Wildlife Refuge, Merced County District Attorney Larry Morse II announced today.

John Ruben Rivera, Jr., aka "Johnny Loco," 42, had long been a suspect in the murder of Ray Sabala, whose body was found lying face down in shallow water at the wildlife refuge on East Sandy Mush Road. An autopsy later revealed that Sabala had been shot once in the back and twice in the head, Morse said.

"A relentless reexamination of the case by Merced County Sheriff's Detectives, especially Det. Chuck Hale, produced new evidence linking Rivera to the homicide," Morse said in announcing the filing of the criminal complaint. Rivera is currently serving a seven year sentence for felon in possession of a firearm and felony evading a peace officer. Prior to the filing of the new charges, Rivera was eligible for release from prison in December, Morse noted.

According to sheriff's investigators, Rivera, Sabala and two others had been using methamphetamine when they went for a drive to the wildlife refuge. An earlier dispute between Rivera and Sabala, possibly over counterfeit money, may have been the motive for the murder, detectives believe. Employees of the wildlife refuge discovered Sabala's body within 24 hours of his murder, according to investigative reports.

Although Rivera was a suspect from the outset, no gun was recovered and no witnesses came forward linking him to the murder, Morse said. He was arrested the same day as Sabala's body was discovered on unrelated charges, he noted.

Merced County Superior Court Presiding Judge John Kiriara signed an order Monday for Rivera's temporary removal from prison. Sheriff's detectives will travel to Salinas Valley State Prison, arrest Rivera and return him to Merced pursuant to the arrest warrant and removal order, Morse said. Rivera is scheduled to be arraigned in Merced Superior Court at 3 p.m. on July 6, he added.

"I cannot say enough about the work Det. Hale and other members of the Merced County Sheriff's Major Crimes Unit did in this case. They simply would not let the investigation go and continued to develop new leads and information that finally convinced me we had enough evidence to charge Rivera," Morse said.

"Det. Hale and I met with members of Ray Sabala's family today to tell them of Rivera's arrest. Nothing will bring Ray back to the family that loved him, but we are hopeful that the family may finally see justice done," Morse said.