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**330 POUNDS OF METHAMPHETAMINE WORTH \$9 MILLION
CONFISCATED BY MERCED COUNTY NARCOTICS TASK FORCE**

In what is believed to be the largest seizure of methamphetamine in Central Valley history, agents from the Merced Multi-Agency Narcotics Task Force arrested 11 men in recent days and confiscated more than 330 pounds of drugs following a lengthy investigation, dubbed Operation Crystal Clear, into the smuggling activities of Millennium, a transnational drug cartel, according to Merced County District Attorney Larry D. Morse II.

Acting on an informant's tip, Task Force agents conducted a "buy/walk" (where drugs are purchased without making an arrest at that time) of one pound of methamphetamine in April. Agents quickly discovered they had come upon a very large transnational narcotics manufacturing and distribution operation seeking to expand its reach into Merced and the Central Valley. They also determined that the cartel was operating from Michoacán, Mexico, Morse said.

The investigation which encompassed the counties of Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Alameda and Merced, led agents to several sites in those counties last week where search warrants issued from Merced County were served.

California Attorney General Kamala Harris was effusive in her praise of the efforts of the agents involved in Operation Crystal Clear.

"The dedicated Special Agents of the Department of Justice have helped disrupt and dismantle another transnational drug cartel operating and transporting narcotics in California. This operation exemplifies the collaborative and diligent efforts of state and local law enforcement," she said.

The biggest meth haul came from a so-called conversion lab (where powdered meth is converted into ice crystals for smoking) in Rialto (San Bernardino County). There, agents found 191 pounds of methamphetamine and over \$15k in cash. A search warrant in Huntington Park (Los Angeles County) found a residence containing 68 pounds of meth; another conversion lab in Victorville (San Bernardino County) yielded approximately 42 pounds of meth. The largest share of money, nearly \$70k, was recovered from a residence in Paramount (Los Angeles County).

According to Ben Buford, Special Agent in Charge of the state Attorney General's Bureau of Investigation in Fresno, which coordinated the operation with the Merced task force, the Millennium cartel was smuggling methamphetamine in powder form across the border to be converted to meth crystals in California.

“It is difficult to smuggle the ICE’d meth (crystal methamphetamine) as the crystals are easily smashed during transportation and harder for them to sell. We also learned that they offered their customers the option of buying the powder form at a reduced rate. The customer could then convert the powder to ICE methamphetamine and make a greater profit,” Buford said, noting that the larger crystals make smoking methamphetamine easier.

Merced County Sheriff Mark Pazin praised the work of his deputy assigned to the Task Force. “Our deputy took what could have been a one-time drug deal of a pound of meth and helped turn it into the seizure of more than 330 pounds of one of the most toxic and destructive drugs on the streets. We obviously are very proud of his efforts and the work of all the agents who participated in this serious disruption of the illicit profit making activities of a transnational drug cartel.”