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May 10, 2017

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**“MASSIVE” SWEEP IN MERCED COUNTY NETS MORE THAN
50 SURENO GANG MEMBERS**

Nearly 500 federal, state and local law enforcement personnel hit the streets at dawn in Merced County on Wednesday executing search warrants and completing arrests of the more than 50 Sureno criminal street gang members targeted as part of a massive multi-agency gang interdiction effort dubbed “Operation Scrapbook,” according to Merced County District Attorney Larry D. Morse II.

At a press conference at the Merced County Emergency Operations Center, law enforcement leaders displayed some of the more than 100 firearms, including assault weapons, and cash seized during the sweep.

“Today was a tremendous day for public safety in Merced County. Some of the most violent criminals in our communities have been taken off our streets along with many of the weapons and substantial cash they use to commit murder and mayhem,” Morse said. “Sheriff Warnke, Atwater Police Chief Sammy Joseph and the rest of Merced’s law enforcement leaders are beyond grateful for the assistance we received today and over the last several months from our colleagues at the federal and state agencies that made today’s incredible success possible,” he added.

California Attorney General Xavier Becerra said, “Merced County residents should sleep a little easier tonight after today’s arrest of gang members and seizure of firearms and drugs. Keeping our communities safe must be our number one priority. Today’s bust is a prime example of law enforcement working together at all levels to put criminals behind bars.”

Wednesday’s action was the culmination of an extensive investigation into the activities of Sureno criminal street gang subsets like A Town Locos, Winton Vario Park and South Side Locs, operating in Merced County communities under the direction of members of the Mexican Mafia prison gang, La Ema, Morse said.

In recent years the Merced Area Gang and Narcotic Enforcement Team (MAGNET), working with agents from the California Department of Justice/California Highway Patrol, Special Operations Unit (CA DOJ/CHP SOU), has successfully targeted Norteno gang activity in Merced in several

large scale multi-agency operations. Hundreds of Norteno gang members were taken off the streets and convicted of a wide range of serious crimes as a result of those previous operations, Morse said.

However, while the successful Norteno gang sweeps dramatically reduced violence over the last two years in Merced County, law enforcement began noticing increasing Sureno gang activity filling the void left by decimated Norteno gangs, particularly in the Atwater and Winton areas. Nortenos (Northerners) and Surenos (Southerners) are mortal enemies who compete, often violently, to sell narcotics, weapons and other contraband in communities across California, Morse noted, adding that Norteno gangs have historically had a much greater presence in Merced County than Surenos.

MAGNET task force members and intelligence analysts from the District Attorney's VIPER program began to gather information that La Ema prison gang leadership had infiltrated Sureno street gangs in Merced County through extortion and fear and began imposing "taxes" on some of the nearly one dozen Sureno subset gangs operating in the county. A power struggle within the Mexican Mafia for control of Merced County Sureno gangs led to an increase in Sureno on Sureno assaults, both at the street level and in the Merced County jail, according to Merced County Sheriff's Department officials. As violent crime by Sureno gang members began to surge, local, state and federal resources were pooled to create "Operation Scrapbook."

Based on intelligence gleaned from this investigation agents were able to provide local detectives with information regarding at least eight homicides and violent assaults and prevented at least 16 additional violent crimes, Morse said. Some of those arrested Wednesday will face prosecution by the United States Attorney's office in Fresno. Others will be prosecuted by the Merced County District Attorney's office. Charges to be filed include assault with a deadly weapon, conspiracy to traffic firearms and drugs, possession of firearms and ammunition by prohibited persons, all of which will include specific gang enhancements which increase prison sentences, Morse said. Several of those arrested Wednesday committed their crimes while already in custody on other charges, he added.

"The people of Merced County owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to those dedicated and courageous officers and intelligence analysts who toiled long, long hours in recent months to painstakingly develop the evidence necessary to bring Operation Scrapbook to its successful conclusion," Morse said. "Lives literally have been saved as a result of their efforts," he added.

Special Agent in Charge Monica M. Miller of the FBI's Sacramento field office noted that "Operation Scrapbook" demonstrated "the strength of strong federal, state and local law enforcement collaboration when combating significant violent crime and gangs in our communities. The FBI is committed to working with our law enforcement partners to remove violent criminals from our neighborhoods, ensuring a brighter future for our families."