Meth smuggler busted near McKenzie Bridge

by Cheryl McDermott

Acting on tips from confidential informants, drug agents and police staked out highway passes Thursday, capturing a Springfield man near McKenzie Bridge who was allegedly attempting to smuggle methamphetamine from the Willamette Valley into central Oregon, authorities reported.

Central Oregon Drug Enforcement (CODE) team members initiated an investigation into the alleged smuggling activities of 35-year old Joaquin Iglesias Avalos of Springfiled back in October of 2006, said Bend Policeâ€™s Lt. Jim Porter.

CODE detectives seized five ounces of meth, allegedly hidden between the transmission console and driverâ€™s seat of the suspectâ€™s pickup â€“ Photo provided by CODE. (Inset) Joaquin Iglesias Avalos - DCJ Photo.

CODE agents, assisted by the narcotics investigation unit of the Springfield Police Department, began monitoring the suspectâ€™s movements and gathering information from confidential informants (CI). The CIs recently provided tips that Avalos was soon preparing to smuggle a large quantity of meth into Central Oregon, the lieutenant said.

On January 25, police staked out several areas of Highways 20 and 126 which connect the central Willamette Valley to central Oregon, said Porter, and spotted the suspect about 3 p.m., sitting in his pickup near milepost 27 of Highway 126 near McKenzie Bridge. According to Porter, Avalos â€œwas acting in a suspicious mannerâ€• and appeared to be waiting for someone.

CODE Detectives searched the suspectâ€™s pickup and allegedly found five ounces of meth hidden between the transmission console and driverâ€™s seat. The drugs seized have an estimated street value of $14,000, said the lieutenant.

Avalos was taken into custody without incident, Lt. Porter said, and transported to Bend where he was booked into the Deschutes County Jail on charges of possession, delivery, and conspiracy to deliver methamphetamine. Avalosâ€™ bail was set at $60,000, but he is being held without bail for federal immigration officials.

Lt. Porter says there are several promising indications that law enforcement is making headway in the fight against the trafficking of methamphetamine in Central Oregon.

â€œThe price is increasing and the purity is decreasing,â€• he said, explaining that near the end of 2004 and through 2005 the quality of meth seized was estimated at 90 percent purity, whereas now it is estimated only between 30-50 percent. During that same time period, the lieutenant said, the price has gone up about 30 percent.

â€œWe have forced the trafficking organizations to change their operating methods,â€• Porter said. â€œIn 2005, five dealers were arrested with one-quarter pound or more of meth. In 2006, that number tripled to 15.â€• The organizations have to use more people and make more trips, he added.

According to the lieutenant, the majority of methamphetamine seized from arrests made by CODE team members originates out of the central California area and Mexico.

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