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Ex-Sandy man gets 7-year term

By Angie Welling

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A former Sandy resident who helped Colombian drug lords hide \$1.1 million in Utah will spend seven years in federal prison.

Mario Roberto Hernandez could have received a much heavier sentence, at least 10 additional years, but was given credit for cooperating with the government in investigating the money-laundering scheme that operated throughout the United States and several other countries.

U.S. District Judge Dale A. Kimball called the reduction "truly extraordinary" but said he has never seen a case in which a criminal defendant has cooperated more readily with the federal government.

Hernandez, 45, agreed to cooperate with law enforcers following his January 2002 arrest, allowing the FBI to travel with him to three scheduled cash pick-ups in which he collected \$923,000, FBI special agent Eugene Casey testified Monday.

He recorded more than 100 telephone conversations with others involved in the scheme, wore body recorders at personal meetings and engaged in e-mail correspondence, Casey said.

Hernandez has so far testified before three separate grand juries and at a criminal trial last November in New York. He has also made the FBI aware of 11 new people involved in the organization, Casey said, and confirmed the identity of several more.

"Mr. Hernandez basically did everything the government has asked him to do and did it well," he said.

Hernandez, a naturalized U.S. citizen from Bogota, Colombia, said Monday he has "turned his life around" and apologized to the court.

"From day one, I've accepted responsibility for my actions," he said. "I'm here to accept the consequences."

Hernandez and his wife, Janeen Beck Hernandez, were originally charged in a 146-count indictment returned January 2002. They pleaded guilty later that year to one count each of money laundering conspiracy, money laundering and structuring financial transactions to evade reporting requirements.

Janeen Beck Hernandez has not yet been sentenced. Two others, Jairo Vanegas and Tomas Martinez, have been sentenced to 46 months and 52 months in prison, respectively.

The four are believed to be the only Utahns involved in the operation.

The FBI's investigation into the Utah arm of the operation — dubbed "Operation Utah Powder" — began in 1996, Casey testified. The probe revealed that Hernandez laundered \$1.1 million in 1998 and another \$2.6 million after he moved to California in 2000.

According to prosecutors, the four Utahns laundered the proceeds of Colombian cocaine and heroin sales in several Utah banks and credit unions as well as the bank accounts of Utah businesses controlled by the defendants.

Hernandez was charged for the Utah conduct only, though his California activities were considered for sentencing purposes.

E-MAIL: awelling@desnews.com

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