

Feds: Mexican drug ring made Central Florida marijuana distribution hub

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By [Amy Pavuk](#), Orlando Sentinel

Mexican drug cartels, responsible for widespread violence and more than 40,000 deaths in that country, operate all across the U.S. — and Central Florida is no exception.

For the past three years, federal agents say, associates of the [Gulf Cartel](#) trucked in thousands of pounds of marijuana to [Apopka](#) and other [Orlando](#) communities — establishing the area as a distribution hub.

They buried millions of dollars on properties in Central Florida. They stashed assault rifles and ballistic vests in Apopka. They stored their drugs in open areas such as garden nurseries.

All the while, their drug trade brought in millions of dollars.

Nine suspected members of the Central Florida ring were recently charged by federal prosecutors in Orlando as part of a complex investigation that spanned to Texas and involved multiple federal and local law-enforcement agencies.

Investigators executed search warrants throughout Florida and in Texas, and seized more than 6,000 pounds of marijuana, more than 90 firearms and cash.

An 81-page criminal complaint filed in the case details much of the group's suspected activities, including previous interactions with law enforcement.

The case, in some ways, is a textbook example of what's happening in the American drug trade, said Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow at the [Cato](#) Institute and author of "The Fire Next Door: Mexico's Drug Violence and the Danger to America," which will be published in October.

"I wouldn't find this incident unusual at all," Carpenter said. "The Mexican cartels have connections with domestic trafficking gangs.

"Their tentacles are quite extensive in the United States."

In the Central Florida ring, agents say, marijuana was shipped in bulk from a trafficker in McAllen, Texas, to [Panama City](#), then picked up and brought to Central Florida or [Jacksonville](#) for distribution.

After the marijuana was sold locally, the cash was picked up and taken back on the same route, to [Panama City](#) and then to Texas.

Once the cash made it to Panama City in the Florida Panhandle, a new load of marijuana was picked up for distribution, and the cycle continued.

Court documents detail the roles of each of the suspected Central Florida ring members. Some were organizers, some were drivers, and others were involved with offloading and delivery.

Sources told agents each shipment of marijuana produced \$800,000 to \$1 million in proceeds.

The group buried the cash on various properties until it was ready to be shipped back to Texas.

It may seem a risky way to store millions, but Carpenter said it's not surprising.

Unlike legal businesses, drug traffickers can't simply deposit their revenue into a bank account.

"You can't just walk into a [Bank of America](#) ... and deposit \$80,000 in cash," Carpenter said. "That would ring alarm bells all over the place."

This is one of the biggest challenges drug cartels have, but certainly not the only problem.

There's always the risk of getting caught — and members of this group had their run-ins with law enforcement before the ring was ultimately brought down by federal authorities in February.

In April 2011, Apopka police stopped and arrested one of the suspected members, Cesar Ramos, who had 400 pounds of marijuana in the bed of his truck, court records said.

Law enforcement investigating the Central Florida ring began surveillance on the group — in addition to working with a confidential source associated with the ring — and knew there would be a marijuana shipment Aug. 29.

That night, Apopka police stopped the driver of a semi truck on Jones Road for a traffic violation and found 2,798 pounds of marijuana hidden in a shipment of produce, reports show. The driver was arrested on state charges.

Earlier this year, law enforcement stopped Ramos again in Louisiana. He was towing a vehicle and told an officer he was hauling the car for a friend and heading to Texas.

When authorities searched the car, they found 10 packages covered in black electrical tape and a yellow spray-sealant foam inside the spare tire.

In them was nearly \$50,000 in cash, court records said.

Law enforcement continued surveillance on the group, and in late January, troopers stopped one of the suspected ring members on Florida's Turnpike after he picked up marijuana that was stored in rural [Osceola County](#).

When authorities searched his truck, they found 16 garbage bags full of marijuana, totaling 700 pounds, court records said. The driver, Jesus Gonzalez-Salcedo, was arrested.

So far, one of the nine suspects in the Central Florida ring, Ivan Alvarado, pleaded guilty in Orlando federal court. He admitted in a plea agreement to being a distributor in the ring. He faces up to life in prison and will be sentenced in June.

Mexican-based criminal organizations dominate the supply, trafficking and wholesale distribution of most illicit drugs in the U.S., according to the 2011 National Drug Threat Assessment produced by the Department of Justice.

The Gulf Cartel is one of the seven main Mexican criminal organizations that traffic drugs in the U.S., and the group is known for selling cocaine and marijuana in Florida, the mid-Atlantic, New England, New York, New Jersey, the Southeast and Southwest.

But unlike Mexico, where thousands have died because of criminal organizations such as the Gulf Cartel, the Sinaloa Cartel and La Familia, the groups in the United States appear to be less violent.

"For the most part, this is pure business," Carpenter said.

"These domestic gangs are kind of the retail outlets for the cartels and their products," Carpenter said. "So far, the violence that has so plagued Mexico and has taken close to 50,000 lives in the last five years doesn't seem to be exploding in the United States."