Police ground cross-border smuggling ring

Cheryl Wierda
Black Press

'These organized criminal groups were motivated by one thing: greed'
~ John McKay, United States Attorney for the Western District of Washington

Two Fraser Valley men face criminal charges after being arrested in Chilliwack in connection to what law enforcement authorities call "one of the most brazen" schemes to smuggle drugs across the Canada-U.S. border.

At a press conference in Bellingham yesterday, authorities from the U.S and Canada unveiled the results—so far—from a police operation targetting a network of smuggling organizations that used aircraft to ferry tons of drugs across the border. The investigation, dubbed Operation Frozen Timber, began in November 2004 and has resulted in the seizure of 8,000 pounds of marijuana, 800 pounds of cocaine, three aircraft, and $1.5 million in U.S. currency.

"I think that the equipment that was seized was certainly the tip of the iceberg," said RCMP chief superintendent Bud Mercer.

"These organized criminal groups were motivated by one thing: greed," said John McKay, United States Attorney for the Western District of Washington. "With Operation Frozen Timber, we not only cut into their profits with countless seizures of drugs and money, we demonstrated that there is a high price to pay. Drug ring leader Robert Kesling now knows that high price—he is doing 17 years in federal prison."

The B.C. based smuggling organizations used helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft to transport drug loads to pre-arranged drop sites in the U.S. They smuggled marijuana into the United States, and cocaine into Canada, police say.

During the course of the police operation, law enforcement officials intercepted more than 17 drug loads, including one shipment in February 2005 involving five suitcases packed with 149 kilograms of cocaine. That constituted the largest single cocaine seizure in Washington state lsat year.

So far, the investigation has resulted in more than 40 arrests of both Americans and Canadians in the U.S.

The first charges in Canadian courts came recently, after the May collaring of an Agassiz and a Chilliwack man. (RCMP have also made four other arrests, but they haven't resulted in charges to date).

Daryl Desjardins, 45, of Agassiz, and Dustin Haugen, 24, of Chilliwack, were arrested in Chilliwack on May 9 after returning to Canada following an alleged drug drop in the United States, said RCMP Superintendent Bill Ard.

On that day, police say they tracked a Bell Jet Ranger owned by Desjardins to a landing site in a state wildlife area in Okanogan County, located in north central Washington. After watching the cargo being transferred to a waiting pick up truck, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents and other officers stopped the vehicle and recovered 329 pounds of marijuana. Two other men were arrested.

Desjardins, described by RCMP as a transporter, and Haugen are next expected to appear in court today. They face charges of import/export of a controlled substance, trafficking in a controlled substance, and possession of firearms contrary to order.

Haugen's name has also popped up elsewhere in the investigation. Crown counsel is currently trying to decide if Haugen will face charges in connection with the March 6, 2005 helicopter crash on 58th Avenue in Abbotsford that killed his live-in girlfriend, 22-year-old Christina Alexander. Police believe the helicopter involved to be linked to the drug smuggling organizations.

They also believe the helicopter destroyed in a crash on September 26, 2005 was also linked to the drug smuggling organizations targetted in Operation Frozen Timber. In that crash, which occurred along mountainous Othello Road in Hope, Abbotsford residents Ove Jensen, 41, and Richard Long, 55, were killed.

In an obituary, Long is described as a pilot, but police say a number of unlicensed pilots were identified in the investigation.

BLOOMING CANADA DAY



Margo Baillie and Tom Skyrme of Scotland walk past a Canadian flag made out of flowers at Minter Gardens on Wednesday. The gardens will be open on the holiday from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. with entertainment in the afternoon. JENNA HAUCK/ PROGRESS

Child care tax benefit not automatic

Wanda Chow
Black Press

The federal government's much-vaunted universal child care benefit (UCCB) won't necessarily be automatically paid out to eligible parents, confirmed the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA).

The $100 a month per child under age six, aimed at defraying the cost of child care, will be paid out automatically to those who are receiving or have applied in the past for the Canada child tax benefit.

However, those who may not have applied for the child tax benefit – because their family income was too high to qualify, for instance – will have to do so to receive the child care benefit, said Ravinder Dhami, a spokesperson for Canada Revenue Agency's Pacific region.

The agency currently has no plans to publicize that fact. "At the moment we are not having any type of campaign," said Dhami. "There may be in the future, maybe closer to [tax] filing season, but at the moment nothing's happening."

But, she noted, "the UCCB will be retroactive 11 months, so if somebody doesn't realize they need to apply, they apply in December, they'll still get it backdated."

The first cheque will be sent out in July, or for those who still have to apply, about two months after the application is received by CRA.

Dhami said it doesn't appear there will be too many that still need to apply. Citing figures from Statistics Canada, she said there are 2.1 million children under age six in Canada and "we have about 1.9 million of them already in our database.

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GVRD breathes easier before the FVRD

Robert Freeman
The Progress

An air quality advisory was lifted Wednesday in the Fraser Valley Regional District, and a day earlier in the Greater Vancouver Regional District.

The advisories are usually issued when the air quality index is about to hit 50 so that the elderly and those with respiratory problems can take precautions.

The index hit 64 in Hope earlier this week, 58 in Chilliwack and in the mid-40s in Abbotsford. On Wednesday the index fell to 20 in Hope where it was expected to remain yesterday. The index fell to 25 in Chilliwack and Abbotsford on Wednesday where it was also expected to remain as temperatures cool.

Bob Smith, the FVRD's air quality consultant, says the unseasonable mix of hot, sunny weather and volatile organic compounds caused a build-up of ozone pushing up the pollution index.

With little wind to disperse the pollutants, mostly from automobiles, they become concentrated as they travel up the funnel-shaped Fraser Valley.

Ozone is a gas produced when nitrogen oxides emitted mainly by cars react with volatile organic compounds – emitted by trucks, ships, plants and trees, says Greater Vancouver Regional District air quality analyst Ken Reid

Sunlight and high temperatures accelerate the reaction, and a temperature inversion keeps ozone in the Fraser Valley.

"You trap the pollution close to the ground, you get some good chemistry going on and you produce ground-level ozone concentrations at levels we would consider to be in the poor category right now," Reid said.

Smith says the index has reached as high as 100 in GVRD in the late 1980s, but has dropped off as tighter vehicle emission standards were introduced.

"We don't get the same kind of levels we did back then, but it's obvious we can still reach those levels," he says.

The alerts came as Greater Vancouver temperatures pushed into record territory in some parts of the region:

- Chilliwack set a new record of 34.5 for June 26. The old mark was 33.9.
- Abbotsford touched 32.5 Monday, a new record above the old mark of 31.4 in 2002.
- White Rock tied its 2002 record high for the day of 26.6.

~ With files from Jeff Nagel