



Department of Justice

**United States Attorney John M. Bales
Eastern District of Texas**

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CONTACT: DAVILYN WALSTON
PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER
PHONE: (409) 839-2538
CELL: (409) 553-9881

Florida Man Sentenced for Lacey Act Violation in East Texas

BEAUMONT, Texas - A 63-year-old West Palm Beach, Florida man has been sentenced to federal prison for his role in a conspiracy to violate the Lacey Act. The two day trial was held in Lufkin before U.S. District Judge Ron Clark in the Eastern District of Texas.

Loren Willis was found guilty by a jury on Oct. 13, 2011, of conspiracy to transport fish in interstate commerce in violation of state law or regulation and transporting or selling fish in interstate commerce in violation of state law or regulation. Willis was sentenced to nine months in federal prison today by U.S. District Judge Ron Clark.

The Lacey Act provides it is unlawful for any person to import, export, transport, sell, receive, acquire or purchase any fish or wildlife or plant taken, possessed, transported or sold in violation of any law, treaty, or regulation of the United States or in violation of any Indian tribal law whether in interstate or foreign commerce.

According to information presented in court, in September 2010, Willis and one of his co-defendants traveled from Florida to Texas with the intention to harvest alligator gar from the Trinity River for the purpose of selling the fish in Japan. Willis did not obtain a non-resident Texas fishing license before harvesting the fish. An additional co-defendant pleaded guilty to charges he altered the documentation submitted to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service to reflect that the fish were captive bred, rather than harvested in the wild. Captive bred fish are not required to be inspected prior to export. The fish which were harvested from the Trinity River were transported by Willis and his co-defendant to Florida, where they were later exported to Japan. Both of Willis' co-defendants pleaded guilty prior to trial.

The trial was the culmination of what began as a nine-month joint investigation between the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department Special Operations Unit and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. In August 2010, the two agencies began investigating multiple individuals who were taking alligator gar illegally from the Trinity River, and subsequently selling the fish domestically and internationally.

"One of our highest priorities is to investigate individuals and companies that are involved in the unlawful commercial trafficking and smuggling of our Nation's fish and wildlife," said Special Agent in Charge Nicholas Chavez. "The successful outcome of this investigation is also the result of working jointly with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department to ensure the protection of a state protected species."

Texas has taken steps in recent years to provide additional protection for alligator gar, including a one-fish-per-day bag limit.

According to information presented in court, Willis and his co-defendants were not satisfied with taking only large brood fish. They eventually escalated their attempt to exploit the alligator gar population by trying to purchase thousands of alligator gar fry from undercover agents. This attempt was foiled by federal and state agents.

This case was investigated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Service and prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Reynaldo Morin.

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