



## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Grand Jury Issues Indictments Alleging Three Schemes to Smuggle Protected Coral Species In and Out of the United States**

*LOS ANGELES* – A federal grand jury has returned three indictments charging a total of three individuals and two companies with engaging in the unlawful trading of live corals that are protected by an international treaty known as the Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

The indictments allege the defendants violated various federal statutes, including smuggling laws, The Endangered Species Act and a conservation statute known as The Lacey Act.

“The mountains, plains and oceans of this planet are under constant assault from those who would harvest these resources without end,” said Acting United States Attorney Sandra R. Brown. “The corals in these cases were being trafficked for the sole purpose of decorating fish tanks. We will enforce federal laws that control the trafficking of wildlife to ensure the ongoing survival of plants and animals that all serve an important role in the environment.”

“Special agents of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service investigated a complex scheme where live coral were illegally ripped from coral reefs, hidden in air cargo shipments and imported at odd hours in an attempt to smuggle them into the United States,” said USFWS Special Agent in Charge Jill Birchell. “This case highlights that wildlife smuggling is a transnational crime that often decimates not only wild populations of animals and fish, but, as in the case of smuggled live coral, the very habitat that imperiled wildlife depend on for survival. We will continue to work closely with our federal, international, and state partners to investigate and prosecute individuals who exploit protected wildlife for financial gain.”

The three indictments outlined below were returned by a grand jury on September 20.

- Renaissance Aquatics, Inc. and Lim Aqua-Nautic Specialist, Inc. – both located in Inglewood – and Chet Bryant, 37, of Houston, were charged with unlawfully importing live, CITES-protected corals from Vietnam and submitting false records

to conceal their unlawful activity on seven occasions over a five-month period. According to court documents in this case, the corals were hidden from view in shipments containing other wildlife. The indictment also charges Renaissance and Bryant with conspiracy and attempting to unlawfully export live coral.

- Jose Torres, 42, of Gardena, was charged with unlawfully attempting to export to Mexico 20 varieties of live, CITES-protected corals. The indictment also alleges that Torres submitted false records to the USFWS that omitted the corals and understated the size of the shipment.
- Jorge Vazquez, 39, of Garden Grove, was charged with unlawfully attempting to export live, CITES-protected corals. Transportation Security Administration officers found the corals hidden in Pringles potato chip cans during a baggage inspection at Los Angeles International Airport. Vazquez later admitted that he packed the corals into the Pringles cans, then placed the cans in his mother's luggage for her to transport to Mexico.

The five defendants will be summoned to appear for arraignment in the United States District Court in the coming weeks.

Each of the three indictments alleges multiple federal charges, including attempting to export wildlife contrary to law, a charge that carries a statutory maximum penalty of 10 years in federal prison. Bryant is charged with seven counts of wildlife smuggling, each of which carries a statutory maximum penalty of 20 years of imprisonment.

These cases were investigated by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

The cases are being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Heather C. Gorman and Dennis Mitchell of the Environmental and Community Safety Crimes Section.