

NEWS RELEASE – 11/14

## **Illegal hunting nets serious charges against four men**

***NOTE TO EDITORS: If you have questions about this news release, please contact U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Public Affairs Officer Steve Segin at 303-236-4578***

Two men from Colorado and two men from Tennessee have been convicted of illegal hunting activities. As a result, two of them have paid substantial fines, one man will spend time in jail and another is performing community service. All of the men could also lose their hunting and fishing privileges in Colorado and 44 other states.

The convictions followed long-term investigations by Colorado Parks and Wildlife and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The violations were committed over the course of a decade in prized Game Management Unit 61 where few elk licenses are available each season and many people wait 20 years or more to draw a tag. GMU 61 is located on the Uncompahgre Plateau west of Montrose.

“We take it seriously when poachers steal wildlife from all of us, especially when they are profiting from that poaching; and we will do everything we can to see that those individuals are brought to justice,” said Renzo DelPiccolo, area wildlife manager for Colorado Parks and Wildlife in Montrose. “Sometimes it takes years to investigate and settle wildlife cases, but that does not deter state and federal investigators from pursuing these crimes.”

Beginning in about 1999 and continuing through 2011, Gerald Lee Sickels, 42, of Nucla, operated as an illegal unlicensed outfitter and took clients on multi-day hunts for which he charged \$1,000 to \$3,000. During that time at least 17 bull elk were killed illegally in GMU 61 by Sickels and his out-of-state clients. At least one mountain lion was also killed illegally. Sickels instructed his clients to purchase other hunting licenses to help cover up the illegal activity.

Sickels and his assistant, Jay Remy Grierson, 46, also of Nucla, were indicted by a federal grand jury in November 2014 for violations of the Lacey Act, a federal law that bans illegal trafficking of wildlife. They faced six counts of conspiracy and interstate sale of unlawfully taken big-game.

Sickels eventually pleaded guilty to one felony count of conspiring to violate the Lacey Act. On Nov. 7, he was sentenced in federal court in Denver to one year of “intermittent incarceration” and one year of probation for conspiring to violate the Lacey Act. Sickels must report to a local detention facility on all non-work days, on all vacation days, and on all holidays during the one-year period. During the probation, he is prohibited from hunting or acting as a hunting guide. He

also had to give up his 1996 Toyota pick-up truck and a Fleetwood camping trailer, both of which were used in the commission of federal crimes.

Grierson pleaded guilty to three misdemeanor violations of the Lacey Act and was sentenced in March 2016 to two years of probation and 40 hours of community service.

Ben Williamson, 61, of Morristown, Tenn., during a trip in 2004 to GMU 61, unlawfully killed two bull elk, one a 6x6 and the other a 7x8. In 2009, his son, Brett Williamson, 26, who did not have a hunting license, killed a 6x6 bull elk. He returned in 2010 and, again without a license, killed two 6x6 bull elk. The two men were charged with misdemeanor violations of the Lacey Act and each paid fines of \$6,500. They also were required to forfeit their trophy mounts.

Officers from the Tennessee Department of Wildlife Resources assisted in the investigation by conducting interviews and seizing evidence.

The Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission Hearing Examiner will review each case and make a determination regarding suspension of the men's hunting and fishing license privileges. Through a nationwide cooperative agreement known as the Interstate Wildlife Violator Compact, the men could lose their license privileges in the 45 participating states

The case was prosecuted by the Environmental Crimes Section of the U.S. Department of Justice, Environment and Natural Resources Division.

Anyone who has information about crimes against wildlife in Colorado can file a report with Operation Game Thief at 1-877-265-6648. Tips can be given anonymously.