

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Austin County jurors handed down a 10 year sentence and a \$10,000.00 fine on February 5, 2013 in Judge Steinhäuser's 155th Judicial District Court for a man convicted of running a sophisticated marijuana growing operation on Orange Hill Road in Sealy, Texas.

Jurors took about an hour and a half to convict Randy Nunez Masson, 39, of possession of more than five pounds but less than fifty pounds of marihuana, a third degree felony. Jurors took approximately the same amount of time to return the prison sentence. The sentence and fine were the maximum the defendant could receive under Texas law.

Attorneys Julio Vela and Daniel Cahill, both of Houston, represented the defendant. District Attorney Travis Koehn and Assistant District Attorney Brandy Davidson presented the State's case.

Evidence showed that in 2008 the Drug Enforcement Administration (D.E.A.) tipped off local law enforcement that a significant amount of marihuana may have been purchased from a rural Austin County residence on Orange Hill Road. The Austin County Sheriff's Office, in cooperation other law enforcement agencies including the Bellville Police Department, the D.E.A. and the Texas Department of Public Safety (D.P.S.) began surveillance of the location.

Investigator Virgil Price led the Austin County Sheriff's Office investigation, and testified he saw the defendant, Randy Nunez Masson, living at the house and almost daily visiting the 80X40 foot shed behind the residence. Further investigation showed the shed was using far more electricity than is typical for an outdoor building. Investigators also watched several other suspected drug dealers visiting and leaving the premises.

In March of 2009, the officers were able to obtain a search warrant for the property. They arrested Masson and two other suspects, and they entered the large metal building. Once inside, the officers discovered 96 marihuana plants ranging from four feet to six feet tall. Once the plants had been stripped and analyzed, the D.P.S. lab found the total weight of usable marihuana to be 29.6 pounds.

Video and photograph evidence showed the shed contained a vast network of ultraviolet lights, lighting timers, fertilization and watering systems. Investigator Price and Texas Ranger Jeff Wolfe testified this was one of the most sophisticated growing operations they had ever seen in their years as narcotics investigators. One of Randy Masson's fingerprints was found on one of the timer switches within the shed.

Assistant District Attorney Brandy Davidson said, "We're proud of the hard work of all the investigators involved, as well as their cooperation with each other and with State and Federal law enforcement agencies."

District Attorney Travis Koehn expressed satisfaction with the verdict. "The evidence indicated that financial backers from Miami, Florida specifically targeted Austin County for this marihuana growing operation due to its seclusion and its relative closeness to the interstate and a major metropolitan area. This Austin County jury sent a strong message to future drug dealers that we absolutely will not tolerate this type of crime in our community," Koehn said.