Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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For Immediate Release: September 27, 2018
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ASHEVILLE, N.C. – A major law enforcement operation targeting drug trafficking in and around Indian Country in North Carolina has resulted in the arrest of more than 75 individuals on federal, state and tribal charges, announced U.S. Secretary of Interior Ryan Zinke and Andrew Murray, U.S. Attorney for the Western District of North Carolina. Additionally, the months-long operation yielded more than 248 pounds of illegal substances including heroin, methamphetamine, and hundreds of opioid pills with an estimated street value of $2 million. Officers also seized 6 illegally-possessed firearms. This operation is the latest conducted by the Interior Department's task force which Secretary Zinke formed in March 2018 to target the opioid crisis in Indian Country.

The undercover operation, led by the Department of Interior's Opioid Reduction Task Force, in coordination with the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indian Police Department and multiple federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies, began in March 2018, and aimed at disrupting and dismantling drug distribution networks operating in and around the Qualla Boundary.

"First and foremost, bravo zulu to the dozens of law enforcement professionals who are on the front lines and putting their own lives at risk to take these deadly drugs off the streets. President Trump and I could not be prouder of their work," **said Secretary Zinke.** "It's heartbreaking to see the scale of the problem, and rather than further stigmatizing victims, we are cracking down on the dealers who are selling out our children, selling out our communities, and selling out our nation. The Trump Administration is serious about ending the opioid crisis and that means both treatment of those suffering as well as eradicating the drugs from our communities. This week's law enforcement action gets us closer to that goal."

"I am extremely grateful to the Secretary of the Interior, the BIA and the multiple state and local agencies who helped make this operation a success," **said Principal Chief of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Richard Sneed.** "The arrest of these drug dealers is a critical step towards ensuring that the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians are able to provide the healthy environment our people deserve."

In addition to the 75 arrests announced today in connection with DOI's Opioid Reduction Task Force operation, a concurrent two-year investigation spearheaded by the Bureau of Indian Affairs' Division of Drug Enforcement and the DEA led to the previous arrest of 57 additional individuals responsible for trafficking opiates and methamphetamine in Indian Country, bringing the total number of those arrested as part of the Western District's drug reduction initiative on the Cherokee Indian Reservation to 132.

To date, the joint investigations have also yielded a seizure of more than 5 pounds of heroin and Fentanyl; more than 20 pounds of methamphetamine; over 210 Fentanyl tablets and Oxycodone tablets; and more than 223 pounds of marijuana, with a combined street value of over $2 million. Over the course of the investigation, law enforcement also seized six illegally possessed firearms.

Other partners involved in the operation include: the DEA; the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indian Police Department; the Swain County Sheriff's Office; the Jackson County Sheriff's Office; the McDowell County Sheriff's Office; the Henderson County Sheriff's Office; the Rutherford County Sheriff's Office; Buncombe County Sheriff's Office; the Asheville Police Department; the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation; and the North Carolina State Highway Patrol; and the U.S. Marshals Service for their coordinated efforts throughout this investigation.

Last year, Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced a series of new actions by the Justice Department to support law enforcement and maintain public safety in Indian Country. Among the actions announced, was the deployment of the expanded Tribal Access Program for National Crime Information (TAP), which is designed to provide the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and other federally-recognized tribes, access to national crime information databases for criminal and civil purposes. TAP allows tribes to more effectively serve and protect their nations' citizens by ensuring the exchange of critical data across the Criminal Justice Information Services (CJIS) systems and other national crime information systems.

In addition, the Office of Tribal Justice created the Indian Country Federal Law Enforcement Coordination Group, an unprecedented partnership that brings together sworn federal agents and key stakeholders from 12 federal law enforcement components with responsibilities in Indian Country, with the goal of increasing collaboration and coordination among law enforcement and enhancing the response to violent crime in Indian Country.

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