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Smugglers Indicted

Office of the United States Attorney
Southern District of California
San Diego, California
November 25, 1987

The United States Attorney Peter K. Nunez today announced that a Federal Grand Jury sitting in San Diego has returned a three-count indictment against a Bell, California pet store owner and a Tijuana, Mexico businessman for their role in a scheme to smuggle approximately \$25,000 worth of exotic parrots into the United States from Mexico. Mr. Nunez stated that Virginia Vidrio, the owner and manager of a retail pet shop in Bell, California known as "Vicky's Pet Shop" at 4249 East Florence Avenue, Bell, California, and Mario Navarro, a resident of Tijuana, Mexico, were charged with smuggling 20 baby yellow-naped Amazon parrots and three military macaws into the United States from Mexico on February 15, 1987. Mr. Nunez continued that the pair were also charged with conspiracy respecting the smuggled birds.

According to the indictment, Vidrio and Navarro participated in a conspiracy between November 1985 and June

1987 to smuggle yellow-naped Amazon parrots and military macaws into the United States from Mexico. Yellow-naped Amazon parrots, commonly referred to as "yellow-napes," are typically found along the Pacific slope of Central America from eastern Oaxaco, southern Mexico, and south to northwestern Costa Rica. The birds are highly valued as domestic pets because of their high intelligence and the ease with which they can learn to mimic human sounds. The retail commercial value of even a single yellow-naped can equal or exceed \$1,000.

Military macaws are typically found along the Pacific slope of Central America from Mexico, and south to northwestern Argentina. The birds are highly valued as domestic pets because of their magnificent plumage. The retail value of a single military macaw can equal or exceed \$800. However, both yellow-naped Amazon parrots and military macaws are protected from commercial exploitation under an international treaty due to their rapidly declining numbers in the wild.

This treaty, known as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, or "CITES," is an international treaty whose purpose is to monitor the trade of and to protect exotic wildlife from commercial activities that might diminish the capability of any species to survive in the wild. Species are protected according to a classification system within CITES known as appendices. Under Appendix II of CITES a species may be imported into the United States from a foreign country only if, prior to importation, the importer possesses a valid foreign export permit issued by the country of origin or a valid foreign re-exporter certificate issued by the country of re-export.

Both baby yellow-napes and military macaws are also carefully monitored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture because they are prone to carry Exotic Newcastle Disease. Exotic Newcastle Disease (also known as Velogenic Viscerotropic Newcastle Disease or "VVND") is a destructive avian disease caused by a virus which, according to the Department of Agriculture, is not found in domestic bird populations. A very high incidence of Exotic Newcastle Disease is found in baby Amazon parrots. Domestic poultry, particularly chickens, are highly susceptible to this disease, and no known medical cure exists. The disease can spread rapidly among poultry populations (within

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hours) and, therefore, requires drastic preventative action by authorities when detected. For instance, entire poultry populations in the diseased area must be eradicated to prevent further contamination. In fact, the nationwide Department of Agriculture bird quarantine system is based upon protecting the domestic poultry industry from the potentially devastating effects of Exotic Newcastle Disease. Therefore, birds such as yellow-napes and military macaws (both of which are prone to carry Exotic Newcastle Disease) must be quarantined before their entry into and commercial distribution within this country.

According to the indictment, between November 1985 and June 1987, Vidrio and Navarro were responsible for shipping at least two shipments of psittacine birds (one consisting of yellow-napes and one consisting of military macaws) into the United States from Mexico while concealing the birds inside panels of vehicles driven by "runners."

Mr. Nunez stated that today's indictment stemmed from a joint investigation conducted by special agents of the U.S. Customs Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Vidrio and Navarro were both arrested on November 13, 1987. Vidrio was arrested at her pet store in Bell, California where a search warrant was executed for evidence of wildlife smuggling violations; Navarro was arrested in the parking lot of the Jack-in-the-Box in San Ysidro while attempting to negotiate an additional sale of smuggled parrots. Mr. Nunez noted that Vidrio was apprehended by the Customs Service on April 2, 1981 for smuggling seven parrots through the Port of Entry at San Ysidro. On that occasion, Vidrio was not criminally prosecuted, but was administratively fined.

Mr. Nunez praised the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Customs Service for their support in bringing about today's indictment. He reiterated that persons face stiff penalties including five years' imprisonment and/or \$250,000 fines for attempting to smuggle any wildlife into the United States. He noted that Vidrio is currently released from custody on \$20,000 bail, and Navarro is in custody, held on a \$75,000 bail. The case has been assigned to the Honorable William B. Enright and is awaiting further court proceedings.

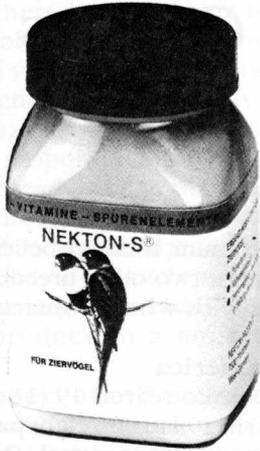
For further information call: Assistant U.S. Attorney Cynthia Lynne Millsaps, (619) 557-5117 

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